

BEN BROWN INSURANCE AGENCY, INC.

Third Generation Takes the Helm

Ben Brown Insurance Agency has long been preparing for the time when the Brown family second generation leader, Mike Brown, retires completely. That transition took place in May 2019. Now the future of this award-winning independent insurance agency is fully and firmly in the hands of its third generation, Mike's sons, Ryan and Evan Brown.

There's also a third person central to facilitating this changing of the guard: Operations Manager Meghan Lee. "Since the moment I was hired I was being groomed ... to take on the daily responsibilities that Mike did administratively," Lee said.

While Ryan and Evan are the executive decision makers and continue to develop the company's commercial lines, Lee manages operations for the 23-employee agency. "We were delegated different tasks based on our personal strengths," she explained.

Lee points out that her success, or succession, is indicative of the company's generosity towards and trust in its employees as members of the larger Ben Brown family. "When we say we are family owned and operated, we really mean it," said Lee.

"In 1956, Ben Brown (the grandfather of Ryan and Evan) started something special here in the way the company treats employees and how we do business. It is up to us to make sure we reinforce that," she added.

That familial culture includes the fact that every employee, no matter what job, will receive an annual profit share bonus. "If you ask any employee here



Ben Brown Insurance vice presidents Evan Brown (l) and Ryan Brown (r), with operations manager Meghan Lee, stand where just-retired president (and the Brown patriarch) Mike Brown used to sit.

about their biggest perk, the answer will be about their compensation," said Lee. "In our size company, really a small business, profit-sharing is rare and that bonus is substantial," she added. The company also offers employer-paid health insurance.

Another positive part of being under the Ben Brown umbrella is that employee opinions are truly valued, said Lee. "I say that as a manager and as an answer for our employees. When you know your voice is heard and your opinions are taken in to consideration. And when you see that decisions are tweaked or totally

#4 Ben Brown Insurance Agency, Inc.

INDUSTRY:
Independent Insurance Agency

EMPLOYEES:
23 in Sarasota

FOUNDED:
1956

#3 company in 2018 Best Places to Work
#7 company in 2017 Best Places to Work

WEBSITE:
benbrownins.com

changed because of something you have contributed, that's extremely valuable. You can't put a price on that," she said.

There's also room for fun at Ben Brown. "We have a fun time together and are all very close," she said. That includes dressing up for Halloween, bowling, baseball and more.

With 15 years in the insurance industry under her belt, the past three at Ben Brown have been her most satisfying. "I tell my kids, when they don't want to go to school, that it's important to make sure they have a job they are passionate about," she said. She leads that idea by example.

JON F. SWIFT CONSTRUCTION

Constructing Work and Life Paths

After 40 years as a leading commercial contractor in Sarasota and Manatee, it's clear that Jon F. Swift Construction knows how to succeed in building for both the private and public sectors. However, it's also true that the company excels in building a strong workplace environment for its employees.

"I feel appreciated and valued every day at my job," said Emmalee Leger, director of marketing at the Sarasota company. In fact, Leger was the first marketing professional this multi-generational company ever hired, more than four years ago. That was when management, realizing they needed to stay focused on executive decision making, moved to delegate and to increase its marketing and business communications efforts.

"I got to create my own path here. They hired me and gave me company goals to accomplish, but how I got to those goals was up to me. I trailblazed opportunities for the company and for my career," she added.

Even though construction work is deadline-based, employees don't go around on tenterhooks here. That's because leadership fosters a drama-free, low stress work environment. "The focus here is in getting the job done," said Leger. She credits this to the atti-



Jon F. Swift Construction builds its employees by encouraging goal success in a hassle-free workplace. From left, Ross Russo, vice president; Jason Swift, president; Justin Williams, vice president; not pictured Jon Swift, CEO.

tude of company president Jason F. Swift. "He is not a micro manager," she said. He creates an easygoing work environment where employees feel safe to speak their opinion and 'manage up' if needed, she explained.

Although the company has a lean staff of just 19 people, more than 75 percent of them have been with the firm for ten-plus years. "We are a multi-generational, true family-based company. We work hard and we also have a lot of fun," said Leger. "We call ourselves the

Swift family, she said.

In fact, the company takes the idea of one big family to the nth degree. The idea includes employees, their families and the community too. For employees, not only are there health life incentives, like a 'Biggest Loser' contest for all those that want to participate, the company offers fully or partially paid parental leave - for men or women - for the birth or adoption of a child. "We just had three babies born," Leger noted.

Leger, who has two young children,

#5 Jon F. Swift Construction

INDUSTRY:
Commercial Contractor

EMPLOYEES:
16 in Sarasota

FOUNDED:
1979

WEBSITE:
jonfswift.com

said that the flexibility to attend to her own kids when needed is an invaluable benefit. "I can take my kid to the doctor, or watch a performance at her elementary school," she explained. "You can't get those kind of moments back."

Children everywhere are important to Jon. F. Swift Construction. The company does a lot of construction work for the school board and discovered that many kids can't afford their mandatory school uniforms. "That ripped our hearts out. We decided, as staff, to raise funds to help. They asked and leadership agreed to match those funds, resulting most recently, in the purchase of 15 belts and 193 pairs of shorts and pants for students at Gocio Elementary.

CUTTING LOOSE SALON

Make Goals & Reap Results

The business of a hair salon is style and style is always changing. So how does a successful, award-winning place like Cutting Loose stay up-to-the-moment? Through a multiverse of training opportunities developed by owner Coral Pleas and linked together through Protégé, by Cutting Loose: The Academy.

While Pleas openly admits the rigor is not for everyone, those stylists who embrace The Academy and Cutting Edge's methods are rewarded by compensation, travel and more. "Through education and experience I'm giving my employees the tools to be successful," said Pleas, who manages Cutting Loose with her son, Travis Scheuer.

The Academy, located within the Cutting Loose headquarters at UTC Plaza, is designed to empower and support stylists at the beginning, middle and throughout their careers here. Coming on board requires going through 18 months of training. Even experienced stylists joining Cutting Loose get at least six months of training to learn the unique French-based styling that the salon is known for.

After graduation individuals are given numbers-driven, clear goals to master in order to rise through four levels of stylists. The higher the level, the more money they will earn. "We have a commitment to excellence. It takes a lot of discipline to stand out. But we have a 70 percent retention rate for those who choose to stay with us," said Pleas.

Career goals are accomplished through a mix of The Academy's learning platforms including peer-to-peer coaching, exhibitions from national and international organizations and premiere classes with Cutting Loose's master stylists. Stylists also meet with Pleas



Cutting Loose Salon offers clear-cut training and levels of accomplishment. Here's Owner Coral Pleas (l) with Kari Bowman, director of operations.

every two weeks to discuss both professional and personal goals.

"Coral looks at you as an individual and really sees your needs: what you want and where you want to be both personally and professionally. She is honestly interested in you," said Kari Bowman, who's worked

#6 Cutting Loose Salon

INDUSTRY:
Hairdressing - Full Service Salon

EMPLOYEES:
61 across three Sarasota/Manatee locations and one in Somers, CT

FOUNDED:
2008 in Sarasota

WEBSITE:
cuttingloose.net

at Cutting Loose for seven years, carving her own career path as director of operations. She started right out of cosmetology school, took the initial training, served as a floor leader for her peers and completed her other goals. The result? "I've had the most amazing opportunities that I never even dreamed I could do," she said.

Bowman appreciates that Cutting Loose offers a clear and structured way to reap career results. "We have salon leaders, floor leaders and Protégé leaders who all help to create change and make improvements when needed. It keeps us from being stagnant," she said. "This is not just some nine to five job, you have some skin in the game so it is very exciting," she added.

For example, when Bowman was a stylist on the floor she entered a competition held by Intercoiffure, a prestigious, non-profit association of which Pleas is a member. "They sent me to Japan. I couldn't believe how wild and crazy that was. That's what happens when you stick with a company that believes in you," said Bowman. "It can take you anywhere, even across the world."