

Ragle Dental Lab:

UNEXPECTEDLY, A FAMILY BUSINESS

MANY LABORATORY OWNERS, from the day they open their doors, imagine the time when their children will come work side by side with them and eventually continue the business into the next generation. Not Jerry Ragle. “I figured they would run away as fast as they could. I never expected it, never thought that either of my children would work at the lab,” he says.”

Not that he didn’t want them to be involved; it’s just that they seemed to have other plans from the get-go. Natalie, who Jerry says wanted to be an accountant “from birth,” pursued a degree in management accounting. She joined the Champaign, Illinois laboratory on a temporary basis in January of 2004—while waiting for “the big job” to come through—but decided to stay on. “Natalie has taken over our accounting department, and it’s been great. She’s really good at it, and there is a lot of trust,” says Jerry.

Jerry’s son, Nick, had worked at the lab on and off over the years, but opted to major in graphic design while in college. After earning his associate’s degree, he found he wanted to work for awhile and joined the lab late last year—and discovered that his artistic talents translated into real technical skill. “He has an eye for detail and, after only a few months as a ceramist, could do what others need years to accomplish,” says Jerry. Nick is also the Captek trainer at the lab, and plans to take on the lab’s newly purchased CAD/CAM system next.

What changed their minds? For Natalie, it was perspective. “I always thought, ‘What? Me in my father’s dental laboratory? No way.’ But it’s funny how things change once you start growing up,” she says. “For one, I grew up in this business; I watched my dad build crowns from day one—I was born the year he started this company. Also, I admire my dad’s determination, enthusiasm and vision. He inspires me to take risks, and never settle.”

Natalie says another determining factor for coming into the laboratory is what would happen to the business once her father retired. “I took a serious look at what my parents had built and knew I didn’t want their efforts to be sold to a stranger. I wanted to keep it in the family,” she says.

Nick’s change of heart came after working for the laboratory out of necessity at first. “I was a little lost as far as my career plans, and looked at the laboratory as something to fall back on,” he says. “But my impression of it now is that it’s solid and practical. I feel like I’m helping guide the business into the future.”

Since Natalie and Nick have just joined within the last year or so, Jerry says they don’t yet have definitive succession plans. “Clearly, Natalie’s role is administrative, and Nick’s is technical. But have we discussed everything? Not at all, it might scare the heck out of them,” he jokes. “But they have a pretty good sense of where they stand and accept that it’s not a free lunch; we all have to work at it.”

Natalie agrees. “Although some might think working for a family business is a free ride, it’s just the opposite. You have to work harder, because your family is counting on you and you don’t want to disappoint them,” she says. “And my father is just as hard on me as he would be with anyone else, maybe even harder.”

Both Natalie and Nick say that their father’s openness to their opinions makes all the difference in their



“I feel like I’m helping guide the business into the future,” says Nick Ragle, pictured here with sister Natalie and their parents, Jerry and Ginny.

working relationship. “I don’t know everything; I admit I’m still learning, too,” says Jerry. “So the nice thing is that we can call each other out on something, and we truly listen to each other.”

If the family members’ obvious mutual respect is any indication of how successful the second-generation Ragles will be, Jerry needn’t worry about the future of his business. “Natalie is smart and she handles a difficult job well,” says Nick. Remarking on her brother, Natalie says, “I love working with him and seeing him succeed. He brings a lot of energy to the lab.”

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—Jerry Ragle