

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Industry executives share their experiences in working in the commercial finance industry with their family members.

BY EILEEN WUBBE



Mark Hafner



Barry Kastner



Brad Kastner



Richard Kohn



Joe Nemia



Debbie Monosson



Helma Mazon



John Mazon



Lisa Mazon



Cara O'Hare



The apple doesn't fall far from the tree rings true for the commercial finance industry. During a recent editorial meeting at the CFA office, Joe Nemia, executive vice president and head of asset-based lending at TD Bank, mentioned that his son would soon be working in the banking industry. The meeting then took a brief detour as we started realizing how many other people also had family members working in the industry. The list of names grew longer and the wheels were turning rapidly. And so the idea of the "family legacy" article for our Human Capital issue was born.

We found a variety of situations that we were aware of — those that currently work with a parent or, in some cases, several members of their family; those whose parent and/or grandparent was an industry leader, and helped pave the way for their sons and daughters in the industry, and those whose relatives are working in the asset-based lending industry, but at different companies. And, of course, some of these situations overlap.

"Are you related to...?"

The benefits of working with a family member in commercial finance seem to far outweigh the struggles. While many people admit to having to work hard to get themselves established, all are grateful for having a mentor to help guide them in the industry.

Burt Abrahams, father of Randy Abrahams, president & CEO of RedRidge Finance Group, was one of many well-known industry leaders. Burt, and his brother Bob, worked at Heller Financial for over 28 years while being active among other institutions. Burt's grandfather, Harry, was the first employee of Heller Financial, working with Walter E. Heller when the company was founded and worked at Heller for more than 30 years. Burt and Bob Abrahams had their own finance company for 12 years prior to joining Heller Financial. Randy's brother, Andrew, worked at Associates Commercial Credit for a decade and Randy's sister-in-law, Beverly, currently works at CapitalOne.

"I am lucky to have had a great father who was a leader in the industry for so many years and an uncle who is also a leading figure and still active today," Randy said. "The bar was set very high as for expectations and standards for work behavior as a young man, since Burt was quite meticulous. If he was angry, he would point the unlit end of his cigar at you, along with some well-chosen words, but he was always elegant. He was like the George Burns of finance. I never worked directly for him, but with him twice. There is no question that having Burt as a father opened doors and I was quite proud and fortunate to have a dad that was, candidly, so well liked amongst his peers."

Joe Nemia can also relate to Randy's experiences. He was influenced by the involvement of his father, Joseph A. Nemia, in the commercial finance industry. Joseph A. Nemia has worked for both family-owned finance companies and commercial banks.

"I was fortunate to have the same name as someone that was deeply respected in the industry, and I guess the feeling was the apple doesn't fall far from the tree . . . well, in my case, not too far," Joe said. "Early on in my career, my dad wouldn't necessarily tutor me in ABL techniques, but I was probably the only 21-year-old riding the F train from Brooklyn reading my dad's copy of Monroe Lazere's book on commercial finance. However, my dad regularly scheduled breakfast with me in New York City on Friday mornings at 7:30 a.m. Of course I would occasionally go out on Thursday evenings and meeting him at 7:30 in the morning was, at times, a bit challenging. He would start his personal inspection, beginning by seeing if my shoes had been shined, my suit wasn't wrinkled, shirt was crisp (no frayed collars or cuffs) and that I was clean shaven."

Joe began his career in the commercial finance industry in 1981 with Chase Manhattan Bank. His first job with Chase was as a field examiner. Joe had a degree in accounting and, not being interested in working in public accounting, he thought that the field examiner

position would allow him to “leverage the limited skills I had at the time”.

“It was an interesting time to be in the industry as the commercial banks were buying family-owned-and-operated commercial finance platforms,” Joe

she wasn’t perceived as being “the boss’s daughter” while working with her father, Sonny, at Boston Financial & Equity Corporation.

Sonny started a factoring company, Berkeley Finance, in 1957 that he sold

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recalled. “Through the years my father and my respective organizations would work together on similar deals, and we would talk about them, usually focusing on the credit aspects. We frequently discussed (and still do) the current ABL landscape and the evolution that the industry has gone through over the past 50-plus years.”

And, right around the time this issue is mailed, Joseph Nemia, III will be starting his career, joining PNC’s Business Credit training program.

“My son was fortunate to have interned for PNC last summer and was offered a position to begin with the bank after graduating from Loyola University of Maryland,” Joe added. Also working in the industry is Joe’s brother-in-law, Craig Simmons, at GE Capital.

In addition to being under a parent’s watchful eye when working, there can also be struggles with separating work from personal life and, similar to the “teacher’s pet” theory, wondering what other, non-related co-workers may think about family members working together.

Debbie Monosson, president & CEO of Boston Financial & Equity Corp., had to take some additional steps to make sure

to Chase in 1967 to start another business. He then started Boston Financial & Equity Corporation in 1968, also as a finance company. Debbie joined in 1989, when the company was looking for a salesperson, and she was looking for a sales position.

“For me, the father – daughter dynamic was difficult,” Debbie said. “When he would correct me or question me, it was hard to separate being a daughter versus an employee. I also had to work harder and make sure that I did not take advantage of being the boss’s daughter. I did not take extra days off or leave early. I didn’t even get his parking space when he traveled—our credit officer did! I worked hard at being my own person and not having other employees look at me as someone special.”

“It was, however, a bit easier for me to make inroads and meet people in the industry because my last name was associated with someone who had been in the business for a long time,” Debbie added. “When my dad was still alive and we worked together, we had a ‘rule’ of not discussing work outside of the office. He definitely was, and continues to be, my mentor.”

Also falling into the industry because

of a parent was Mark Hafner, whose father, Bron, worked in commercial finance for years. Now fully retired and living in Henderson, NV, Bron was a liberal arts major who went into the Marine Corps directly after college. Once he came out of the military, he took a job at Union Bank in their management training program, and then went back to school, taking night classes in finance.

“My birth disrupted one of his final exams, which I have heard about over the years,” Mark said. “I was only aware of the industry because of my father. If not for him, I have no idea what I would be doing today. I owe him more than I can express, not only for showing me an industry I have come to love, but for guiding me through my education in the field and allowing me to develop at my own speed. He never pushed me to be here, but I know he is very thankful for the way it worked out.”

Mark studied accounting and thought he would become a CPA, but ended up starting his career with Security Pacific Business Credit in 1984 as an auditor.

“Accounting was a great background for what I eventually worked into,” Mark said. “After about a year, my dad hired me to work at Celtic. At the time, our average loan was about \$100,000 and our whole portfolio was \$1.5 million. It was just the two of us and two clerical staff.”

After seven years of working at Celtic, Mark decided to take a six-month break to try something different, but found that he missed working in the industry.

“Back in 1992, after working for my dad for seven years, I was restless,” he explained. “I was 30 and wondering if this is what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Was I good at this or just someone’s son who got some breaks? I decided I needed to leave the business and stressed to no end about telling my dad I was leaving. When I did tell him, he couldn’t have been more understanding. He told me he wanted me to be happy and to do what I needed to do to achieve that. He was disappointed, of course, but he knew the family relationship far outweighed the business one. I left, moved to San Francisco and took a job

with Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance selling life insurance. I was trained and passed the state exam, but found I was not cut out to sell life insurance. Within six months I realized I missed the commercial finance business and working with my dad. He welcomed me back and I haven't looked back since. Had I not done that, I would have always wondered if I made the right choice with my life. Had he not been so supportive, I would not have wanted to come back. I give him a lot of credit for giving me the room to grow in my own way. I look back at that time and realize it was the best thing I could have done, and I am very lucky it turned out the way it did."

Mark's brother now works at Celtic as well, as its full-time chief technology officer. Not surprisingly, Mark's brother began his career working for eight years with Bill Stucky of William Stucky & Associates, a well-known software service provider in the industry.

"Due to that experience, and from conversations at family gatherings, my brother knew the business, just from a different perspective," Mark said. "We have always used the Stucky system, but it is the pre-PC version Bill originally sold. Although we have altered it dramatically in the years since, the guts of it were the same system my brother worked on, just in a different code language."

Richard Kohn, senior partner of Goldberg Kohn, Ltd. and CFA's Co-General Counsel, literally grew up with the CFA. Richard's father, LeRoy Kohn, ran Mercantile Financial Corporation, which was the oldest independent finance company in Chicago, having been founded by Richard's grandfather, Hyman Kohn, in 1917.

"To say that my dad was extremely involved with the CFA would be an understatement," Richard said. "He first became a member of the Executive Committee of CFA (then known as the National Commercial Finance Conference) in 1958, and served as its president in 1973-74 and its chairman in 1975-76. He truly loved the CFA, especially for all of the close friendships he formed over

the years, and derived great pleasure from watching the Association grow and evolve – even long after he retired. Although I didn't follow my dad into the finance business, I was caught in its gravitational field as a lawyer representing commercial finance lenders."

"The CFA was always a family affair for us. My mother still remembers fondly all of her many CFA friends, and when I was married in 1966, my wife, Joan, was immediately inducted into the CFA family, accompanying my parents and me to annual and mid-year meetings. Our children were also enthusiastic participants at mid-year meetings. I'm not sure Joan realized that the CFA was part of the deal when she married me, but she fit right in, and soon developed many friendships of her own there.

"Although my dad passed away in March 2002, I'm truly grateful that he lived long enough to witness my appointment as Co-General Counsel of CFA a few months earlier. It was a source of immense pride for him, which made the event all the more meaningful to me."

A True Family Affair

Perhaps tying for first prize for having the most family members working together in commercial finance are Mazon Associates and Graystone Capital. Mazon began in 1976, founded by Helma and John Mazon, and began in the

Currently, all of the immediate family members of the Mazons work there—including Shelley, Johnny and Lisa, as well as John, Shelley's husband.

Lisa, vice president, has been with the company for 20 years. She was six when the company began and has learned the business through a variety of roles.

"When our company moved into an office, I would often answer the phone, make collection calls, mail invoices or statements, mail out direct marketing pieces, really anything that needed to be done," Lisa explained. "I officially started in the Fall of 1993, after a brief job at GTE (now Verizon). I started my training by programming our fax machines and looking up credit in our DNB books. I also had to learn how to use a ten-key to add up the invoices we were purchasing each day. I really started at the very bottom and worked my way up through every job in our company.

"Today, we work really well together and know the strengths and weaknesses of each other," she added. "We are able to learn so much from our parents and their experiences. We try to keep work during work hours and enjoy our time off in the evenings and weekends. We swap stories and my Mom and Dad enjoy the mentor role."

Also featuring several employees of the same family are the O'Hares at Graystone Capital. Kevin O'Hare, presi-

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Mazon's home, with clients visiting there or the family travelling to visit clients.

dent, began working in the commercial finance industry in 1980, and started

Graystone in 2005. His daughter, Cara, joined in 2009 and is the marketing director and handles business development. Sean, Cara's brother, also works at the company, focusing on portfolio management in its operations and credit areas. Kevin's father, Tom, helps in verifying invoices at Graystone. Then there is also Kevin's sister, Colleen, who is Graystone's loan documentation manager. Colleen used to work for Wells Fargo Bank and has been working with Kevin since Graystone Capital began.

Kevin's undergraduate degree was in marketing and his MBA degree was concentrated in finance. He started working for a factoring company after being in the mortgage business during the late '70s. After that he worked for various banks and commercial finance lenders

social media experience," Cara said. "My dad didn't have a person to fill that role prior, so it worked out nicely. I'm extremely happy with my decision to join in the family business fun. This industry is so unique, I am constantly learning something new and being inspired by all the wonderful entrepreneurial companies we encounter."

Although Cara admits that, at times, family members can be "irritating" and too much time spent with anyone can get monotonous, the advantages of working with family members far outweigh all of the minor irritations.

"You have the opportunity to share ideas with one another," Cara said. "I'm never shy to share with my dad my ideas, so I think that is a benefit. Sometimes he thinks they are good ones and tells me

the management of our loan book and with our cash disbursement activities. If you can't trust your own family, then who can you trust? The only thing I notice is that family members are seemingly bolder in expressing their opinions and may do so with more vigor. However, that may not be a bad thing as we don't have many lingering problems nor do things seem to fester much. Also, you might say that we are a family-centric business, but we also are blessed to have some high-quality colleagues who are unrelated to us."

"Our goal is to continue growing and, if we are successful in doing so, our non-family staff will increase and enhance our family-oriented culture," Kevin said. "In the past, I think there were more opportunities for family businesses to thrive in the lending business. I believe that's still the case in the factoring industry; however, in the ABL space that we target it's to a much lesser extent and I think that will only help my family members with their future careers."

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in their ABL/factoring/financial services areas such as Imperial Bank (Comerica), Silicon Valley Bank, Greater Bay (Wells Fargo) and BFI (Pacific Western Bank). He also founded Pacific Business Funding, which is similar to Graystone, and sold that to Greater Bay Bank in 1998.

Cara fell into the family business when she was thinking of moving back to the San Francisco Bay Area from Phoenix, where she attended college and worked for a few years after graduating.

"Graystone Capital was growing and, at the same time, I was ready for a career change, so I put together a plan of all the ways I could help my dad's company with my marketing, public relations and

to go ahead with it and other times it's the opposite reaction. Another benefit relates to all the nuggets of information I have learned from my relatives within the industry, especially from my dad. He has taught me so much and it seems like he enjoys doing so. I feel lucky to work for my dad who I trust and it certainly eliminates the chances of working for an egotistical boss."

"I hope she doesn't quit because she gets tired of working for an egotistical dad!" Kevin added. "On a serious note, I have been very fortunate to have my family to rely upon, especially in the early days when I had to entrust others to be responsible for assisting me with

In the Industry, at Different Places

Barry Kastner and son Brad are both working in the industry at different ABL companies. Barry is executive vice president at Keltic Financial Services and Brad is vice president at Amalgamated Capital.

Brad started out at CIT in October 2005, after graduating from Syracuse University in the spring with a degree in marketing. At that time, his father was working at Wachovia Capital Finance, which had just integrated Congress Financial, where he had worked his entire career.

"I knew I wanted to have a career in business, but didn't know exactly what I wanted to do," Brad explained. "I grew up hearing my dad talk about business and I could tell it was something that he took a lot of pride in. After I accepted my first job offer, he joked that it isn't a life sentence, even though his first job lasted over 30 years."

"My degree was in psychology," Barry said. "However, after joining Congress Financial, I attended evening classes

at New York University for two and a half years to further my business and finance education. Through CFA classes I learned more about the business, and eventually became an instructor in the same classes I attended. I joined Congress Financial as a summer intern a week after graduating from college, and stayed with Congress for 33 years, eventually becoming chief operating officer. My uncle, Bob Miller, was one of the principals at Congress. Like many people in the business, it was not my plan to spend my entire career in the asset-based business, but I quickly became enamored with the business, recognized the potential opportunity and fell into it.

“Brad ‘grew up’ around the business, and always seemed intrigued with it. He heard many one-sided phone conversations and attended business-related conferences with me. He was naturally curious, and always asked good questions. I remember him once asking, ‘What language are you speaking?’ The questions got more specific and insightful as Brad grew older. Aside from the technical aspects of the business, Brad has a natural ability to relate to people, which is paramount in our ‘relationship’ business.”

“Working in the same industry provides yet another common bond, which most fathers/sons don’t have, and it provides a good sounding board for both of us,” Barry continued. “From a father’s perspective, it gives Brad a better understanding of what work-life was like for me while I was busy slaying dragons and putting out fires while he was growing up, in between the times we spent together. I pretty much know what his work-life, ambitions and challenges are. It’s really a great source of pride for me to see him working hard and enjoying the industry and its camaraderie that I have enjoyed working in for many years.”

Both Brad Kastner and Mark Hafner mentioned that establishing your own identity early in your career can pose its set of challenges when your parent is so well-known.

“I think building my own identity was

tougher early in my career when people generally knew me as ‘Barry’s kid’, but as I’ve now worked on many deals, with many different people over the last seven years, I think I’m now perceived more independently,” Brad added.

Mark mentioned that the best way to handle getting established is to resist the urge to make a name for yourself and learn as much as you can, while taking advantage of the exposure and contacts you will make.

“You have to learn to be patient and not be upset if people comment on ‘I’ve known your dad for 20 years,’ or if clients, not liking your answer, call him to go above you,” Mark said. “You’ll get your chance to lead and to shine in due time. My dad and I had a great working relationship, as he let me make my own mistakes, and I like to think that my ego wasn’t such that I was afraid of going to him when I was in over my head.”

Legacy Living On

“The best advice my father gave me was to trust my ‘gut’...but it is not something he could teach me; he told me it would come with time and with experience,” Debbie Monosson said. “There are instances when I do pass on a deal based on my gut and it’s difficult to explain to someone why, other than one day, they too, will understand. It comes with time. He also always told me to be humble with clients, prospects and with others. Being humble will take you further than being boastful. I pass this advice on to everyone at BFEC.”

“I’ve always been somewhat amazed at how many youngsters follow in their family footsteps and enter the ABL/factoring community,” Barry added. “To me, it speaks volumes about the industry; specifically about the industry and the community and the rewards it has to offer – and I don’t mean purely the financial rewards – but the excitement of touching so many different businesses and industries, the camaraderie, the relationships and the opportunity to meet with so many fascinating people. These young folks clearly recognize the passions that many of us veterans have

for the business. They don’t learn it in school; they learn it growing up and it becomes somewhat infectious. We don’t twist their arms to influence their career choices — they are smart kids, and can go in several different directions if they choose. We are not handing them a successful family businesses to take over. In fact, they carry the extra burden of having to prove themselves and their own abilities, and may feel they have to live up to expectations because of their heritage. I, for one, could not be prouder that my son chose to pursue this industry.”

We realize there are more of you out there who are part of a multi-generational ABL or factoring family. We may decide to do a Part 2 of this article. If you wish to be included, please email us at tsl@cfa.com. **TSL**

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