

# Who Takes



**GENETIC SEQUENCING**  
Shelby Shy followed her mother, Jo Buttram (left) into running the wedding business at the flower shop started by Jo's mother.

# This Bridal Business?

**A florist finds just the right person to have and to hold her wedding business.**

BY AMANDA LONG

Jo Buttram, AAF, will never forget the day the wedding calls stopped coming for her at Shirley's Flowers.

Last fall, a bridal customer called with one of those pressing wedding-related questions that usually need to be answered on the spot. Although she hadn't worked with this customer, Buttram had fielded thousands of such calls over the last 24 years and was ready to help. The bride-to-be didn't want her help. She wanted Buttram's 28-year-old replacement, Shelby Shy, who was out of town.

"She said, 'No, I will just wait on Shelby to get back,'" says Buttram, who started as manager of the Rogers, Ark., shop in 1979 and became owner in 1985. "I thought, 'Wow. There's no turning back.'"

It's a good thing Buttram liked the direction she was headed: away from the wedding business and toward a more balanced managerial role. But it's even better that she loved the person who was taking over her time-consuming — yet ego-feeding — job as wedding coordinator. Shy is Buttram's daughter.

Being eclipsed by an up-and-comer in your shop would be hard for many florists and perhaps downright devastating for one who'd built the wedding business from almost nothing into a powerhouse that attracted brides from much larger cities four hours away. But when that up-

and-comer is someone you watched take her first steps and grow up to take on a demanding corporate job at the nation's biggest retailer, you have a different perspective on the transition. Where envy could have jeopardized the transition, Buttram's pride let her step back and watch the next generation start to make its mark on the shop and its city, just as she did when she bought the shop from her mother, Shirley Cole.

"It felt so natural to give it to Shelby. She identifies with me, values what I value and knows how much this business means to me," Buttram, 54, says. "This (wedding business) was my baby. So who better to give it to?"

But this isn't a Lifetime special. No one is cueing "Wind Beneath My Wings" or suggesting Buttram just handed over her life's work like a family pie recipe with a "Good luck and don't forget to use real butter in the crust." Nor did Shy just take on the job like it was her birthright. Both mother and daughter knew just how much was riding on this transition, personally and professionally.

"I'd spent my life watching Mom pour her life into this business, and it became a success because of her reputation and the staff who treated her like family," Shy says. "There was some real pressure and questions to struggle with. Could I keep it up? Could I do things my own way? What if I didn't want to give up my life for the shop?"

What exactly was at stake? Well, Buttram's "baby" had long surpassed that first year of 15 to 20 weddings. By 2007, she was pulling in about 120. And it didn't get there without a hard-charging maternal force. "In the early days, I decided to do several things that set me apart. I wanted to be No. 1," Buttram says. "I have a major competitive gene handed down from my father." (See *Jo Knows Growth*, p. 24)

## **Break Up or Breakdown**

In 2008, the shop had more than \$1 million in sales and 13 employees. Weddings accounted for 30 percent of sales. Buttram opened another, smaller location and purchased a 15- by 70-foot cooler to accom-

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moderate the growing wedding and event business and everyday sales. Although customers thought of Shirley's as more than a wedding florist, Buttram's role in the shop was nearly consumed by this one sector of sales. She'd take calls at home at all hours and often come in on Sundays to catch up on paperwork. After working at the shop from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., she'd work up bridal quotes at home. Those missed middle-school swim practices of Shy's became missed college meets. Mother-daughter weekends at Shy's sorority became daughter-only weekends. Although Shy dismisses any hurt feelings, Buttram won't let herself off the hook so easily.

"It was all I did and everything else suffered — everything," Buttram says. "When

you do that many weddings for that long, you're recognized. People think you're the bomb. Moms send their daughters to you. You start to feed on that a little."

And it starts eating away at everything else you do. In the past two decades, Buttram hadn't been away from the store for more than a couple of days at a time. When she did leave, usually to go to floral conventions or bridal shows, Buttram called the shop several times a day — not because she didn't trust her staff to get the job done, but because she'd never let them take on more responsibilities. Her employees "had to stand in a line" near her office or the bridal area to ask a simple question.

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## JO KNOWS GROWTH

In 1979, Jo Buttram, AAF, joined a shop that barely registered with brides and quickly turned it into a regional must-stop for weddings. How'd she do it? By rarely sitting still, hardly ever staying quiet, never letting an opportunity pass by or missing the chance to create one, if no one else would.

She called bridal magazine editors and mailed them pictures of her wedding designs. When that didn't get their attention, she jumped in the car and drove hours to show them the goods in person. Buttram showed up at every wedding show she could juggle in the tri-state area, often putting the shop, Shirley's Flowers, before her family, friends and sleep.

At a time and in a community where spending more than \$25 on a centerpiece seemed extravagant and renting a container seemed downright silly, Buttram bought silver urns and let brides borrow them. "Well, you know what a gorgeous urn for the front of the church can do; news traveled fast," she says. "Then the best thing happened: word of mouth. Satisfied customers started telling their friends and we were on our way."

Buttram's way, however, didn't lead to many rest stops. Having developed a reputation with her customers, she set out to establish a professional group of vendors to elevate the wedding profession in her region.

She connected with a classmate who owned a tux shop, found a bridal shop and put on a fashion show in the local mall. To get a sense of how progressive this very public, aggressive bridal marketing was in Northwest Arkansas, you have to know how foreign bridal terms and trends were to local consumers. "I had built an archway out of babies breath — remember this is the early '80s — and the emcee, a local newscaster, kept on saying 'babies breast,'" Buttram says. "I was mortified."

The audience was mesmerized. So were fellow vendors who heard about this first production of the Northwest Arkansas Wedding Group — a name coined on the spot. Buttram booked five weddings and scored some prom customers. "I know that does not sound impressive now," she says. "But back then ... oh baby, five more weddings was awesome."

Soon, a baker, a wedding coordinator and a photographer joined the Northwest Arkansas Wedding Group, and began advertising together until the group became so large that a publishing/marketing company took it over. This year, the bridal show had 75 booths and 200 brides-to-be, and Shirley's Flower had more wedding sales in one month than the shop had the entire year Buttram bought the store in 1985. — A.L.



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Her exercise regimen took a back seat, until it was almost going nowhere.  
 "I wasn't running the shop," she says.  
 "It was running me."

**Next In Line?**

The shop had thrived, as had Shy, Buttram's other baby. After a college internship at Wal-Mart, Shy was recruited to work full-time at its nearby headquarters when she graduated. Her intense focus, knack for details and style made her the ideal buyer, and her inherited drive had her taking on more responsibilities and chalking up more global travel in her five years at the retail powerhouse.

But after a severe illness in 2006, Shy had to reconsider the pace of her corporate climb. She faced the facts: the rush was gone, the payoff was lacking. She quit. When Buttram watched her daughter confidently stop chasing that next big promotion (and get home before 8 p.m.), the florist had to rethink her own next step. What if — when she asked her daughter for the umpteenth time if the family business might be in her future — Shy said yes? She didn't have to wonder or wait for long. Shy joined the shop in July 2008.

The plan was to gradually bring Shy into the fold. Buttram and Shy made sure to let the shop's managers in on the timeline, including Buttram's longer-term goal of passing the shop down. They made it clear to everyone that the "new girl" would not take any power or territory from them. Instead, she'd command projects no one had the time or skills to tackle, like marketing and Web site development. Once Shy was familiar with the shop's inner workings, Buttram started training her in the wedding sales. Shy was a quick study whose natural curiosity and independence made quick work of the initial training phase. Shy learned about design terminology, but the selling and conceptualizing bent of her role meant no lengthy design classes (and no swiping of well-earned positions from long-time designers). After two months, Shy was ready to propose her ideas to brides.

"She was a duck to water, no question about it," Buttram says. "When she's ready to take charge, she's not the type to stay in one place."

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## TAKE WHICH JOB AND SHOVE IT?

Jo Buttram, AAF, handed off her wedding business to her daughter to be the owner and manager she never had time to be at Shirley's Flowers. We asked florists which job they would delegate if they had the freedom, confidence and staff to do so. Maybe it's because we asked right around tax time, or perhaps the reality of a faltering economy is getting to be too much to stare at, but at least one third of the respondents couldn't wait to take the job of taxes, bookkeeping and financials and shove it onto someone else.

"I have entertained the thought of hiring an office manager, but doing the day-to-day bookkeeping keeps me in touch with the daily operational costs and purchasing efficiencies of my shop," say Tim Farrell AAF, AIFD, PFCI, of Farrell's Florist Drexel Hill, Pa.

At Foxgloves & Ivy in Atlanta, Greg Brown, AIFD, thinks daily about hiring a numbers person, but what's stopping him is a lack of money, not a need to keep his head in the financial details. "The paperwork is so time consuming and overwhelming at times," says the shop's co-owner and head designer. "We are trying to work with a skeleton crew to survive this slowdown."

Beyond the books, tasks that pull florists into the weeds and keep them from seeing the big picture were common. See if you can relate:

> "In the short term, (I'd love to delegate) government payroll tax preparation and filing. In the long term, the daily design work, so I can focus more of my time on the events and business building. We have been working without (a design manager) since last June and it is wearing me thin."

**Vince Butera** AIFD, PFCI  
Butera The Florist, York, Pa.

> "Updating our Teleflora Web site," which is on the to-do list along with taking and scanning digital pictures of the shop's work, since Whigham bought her staff laptops.

**Kit Whigham**  
Sanford Flower Shop, Sanford, Fla.

> "We have an alarm system for our greenhouse production facility that monitors temperature, electricity and boiler operation. I could do without the middle-of-the-night alarm call that happens two to three times during the winter, as it happened in mid-January when it was some 18 degrees below."

**Rod Saline**, AAF  
Engwall Florist, Greenhouse and Garden Center, Duluth, Minn.

> "Lots of little things, such as returning calls for simple requests, updating computer and researching technology problems, important in their own way, that would, individually, take too long to train someone to do. I know I should find someone to do this stuff. I could/should be devoting that time to more valuable projects."

**Paul Brockway**, AAF  
Conklyn's Florist, Alexandria, Va.

But there are some duties, no matter how late they keep you up at night — or wake you up in the middle of it — that some florists wouldn't dream of delegating.

> "At least once and up to three times a week to I get up at 3:30 a.m. to travel to a Dutch flower auction. It takes me 90 minutes to drive there for a 6 a.m. auction, which can be up to three hours. And I love it. I love the flower business, and this is the place that it all comes together for me. I would have a very hard time giving this up to someone else. It is definitely a huge weakness in our organization — after all, how far can a flower shop go if no one knows how to buy flowers? I have the best staff that a flower shop owner could ask for, but I just can't make myself teach anyone else to do this job. I love it that much."

**Ted Quinn**  
Quinn's Blooms & Greenery, Inc.  
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> "I'm hands-on everyday. My niece would have me work less and enjoy life more, but I love getting my hands dirty."

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But was Buttram ready to cede hers? The long days and seemingly endless games of telephone ping-pong with nervous customers — those she'd gladly toss like a reception bouquet. But when you've been the florist that brides, moms, photographers, colleagues and editors come to for everything wedding-related for more than half your life, it's not just a matter of job duties. Buttram had to own up to an identity crisis of sorts.

"It was really a huge adjustment, the weddings were a big part of who I was," Buttram says. "But being able to introduce Shelby as the new face of that, it helped. I didn't feel like I was giving up anything, just replacing it with something new."

Shy had an adjustment period, too. Buying ladies' underwear for Wal-Mart and matching bridesmaid's dresses to roses aren't exactly overlapping skill sets. "I was nervous," she says. "Running the weddings is essentially running a small business. I'd run a department, but never a business."

She'd seen plenty episodes of "Bridezilla," and watched the entire family get in on the drama on the reality show. As if her own mother wasn't a tough enough crowd, Shy worried about the mothers of the brides, many of whom had trusted her mom with their own big days.

"My biggest fear was that the mothers would look down to me like I was a kid," she says. "I countered that with knowledge. If I knew the flowers and venues, they would see me as a resource, not just someone the same age as their daughter."

Buttram, however, was convinced from the get-go that Shy's age was more an attraction for brides than a distraction for mothers. Married for only a few years, Shy still had images of bridal magazines stuck in her head and shared a common language and style context with her customers. "She spoke their language," Buttram says. "Or, I should say, she 'e-mailed' their language."

### Something Old, Something New

Use of time is the most noticeable difference now that Shy does weddings. Shy spends a lot less time than Buttram did actually getting wedding jobs and communicating with brides. And Buttram spends a lot more time running the shop.

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Technology drives that change. "When I lose my Internet connection, I lose my mind," Shy says, echoing the lament of her peers, many of whom are her customers.

Shy no longer hauls out the 10-plus albums Buttram filled with wedding photos; instead, she clicks on a link. She doesn't spend precious minutes describing every new arrangement or calming every fear over the course of several phone calls. She responds to brides' e-mails or texts as they come in, often with a photo attached to answer the question.

Spreadsheets have saved hours on the front end of the order. Shy puts the entire wedding order on one and e-mails it to the couple to make changes or approve it. This "show" not "tell" approach saves time and gives the couple a sense of control of the process, because the details are literally right there in their hands.

"It takes her half the time it took me and brides love her because she's young. She's a natural," Buttram says. Shy's speedy replies and generosity in sending photos and details are driven by her strong respect of her own time.

"I saw how my mom gave her nights, weekends and free time to other families — and it's why this business is so strong — but I want to set these borders at the outset," she says.

Shy is quick to explain that shorter, e-mailed conversations and a stricter schedule don't mean she's inflexible or less committed to making her brides happy. "If the bride can only see me at 8 p.m., I'll do it, no questions," she says. "But I'm more inclined to give her my available times and see if she can do that, whereas Mom would just say, 'Sure. Sunday works.'"

In addition to updating the Web site, Shy started a blog in December and has taken existing relationships with vendors to new levels. Last year, the shop worked with a bridal shop for its "She Said Yes" trunk show. The shop's weddings will also be featured in a new book being published by a local wedding photographer.

## **Surely, Your Flowers Are from Shirley's**

One constant is the number of compliments from satisfied brides. When asked if she could remember her first signature wedding, Buttram answered for her

daughter, describing a modern contemporary affair that won over a prominent, high-profile local family. Buttram also recalls, with pride, the first time the customer looked to Shy for all the answers and ideas in a consultation. That's when Mom decided to take the training wheels off and let Shy do consultations solo.

Another seamless transition reminder: A classmate of Shy's had cancelled a wedding that Buttram had been hired for. When she got engaged again, she wanted a radical change in themes from traditional to ultra-contemporary. She never questioned where she'd go for her flowers, despite the change in management.

"My goal is to keep the reputation as strong as ever," Shy says. Keeping sales at the high levels of the recent go-go years — when couples didn't blink at spending \$40,000 for a ceremony — has been a challenge, one Shy admits has tested her nerves and confidence. Having seen her mother devote so much to building the shop's reputation has made her even more protective of it. She relies on a steady dose of industry benchmarks and the shop's history of surviving tough times to keep perspective.

In 2008, Shirley's Flowers had 150 weddings, the same as the year before, but total wedding sales have dropped off 1.6 percent, compared to 2007. According to The Wedding Report, a bridal research firm, the average cost of a wedding in 2008 was \$21,814, a 24 percent decline compared to 2007.

"She's having to knuckle down and be as creative, as responsive and as tough as ever to keep business coming in," Buttram says. "I think it will make her stronger."

## **It's All Relative**

Just like Mom, Shy never hesitates to heap praise on the shop's staff, especially those who patiently explained design terms, helped her get the hang of recipes and adapted to her e-mail heavy communication style.

"We would never be as successful without their dedication and hard work," Shy says, "Here at Shirley's it is not just about mom and me."

Both mother and daughter have learned the lessons of a work-life balance thrown off-kilter. They try to keep



**KNOT SHY** Shelby Shy, a former college swimmer, took to working with brides like a "duck to water," and quickly made a splash with young brides, says her proud mother and relieved business partner.



**SITTING PRETTY** Since handing off her shop's wedding business, Jo Buttram has been able to reacquire herself with her office and manage from a position of authority.

the balance for their employees, by keeping schedules consistent and last-minute emergencies to a minimum. "This life is too short," Buttram says. "Shelby grew up in the flower business and always understood. But, I'm glad she's making a distinction between her life and our shop — it's a lesson I didn't learn until almost too late." 🌸

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