

Family 'Matters'

BY LARRY AYLWARD,
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The Kuehner brothers learned early on the most important aspect of their kin's business

It was too much of a risk, Genevieve Rack thought. Making this deal could imperil the family business.

So "Gen," as family and friends called her, cast her vote "no" for the family business to put up the financially stable golf course it owned near Pittsburgh as collateral to purchase a financially troubled golf course near Fort Lauderdale, Fla. It just didn't make sense to Gen to mess with a good thing.

The Rack family had owned and operated 7 Springs Golf Course, an 18-hole pub-

lic track near Pittsburgh, for nearly 30 years. It was 1985 and business was solid there. Several members of the family worked at 7 Springs and lived decent lives. Gen didn't see why the family should jeopardize a business it had worked so hard to maintain.

Gen's husband, Eddie Rack, was a member of the Florida course, the 36-hole Colony West Country Club in Tamarac, Fla., that was for sale. He was approached about buying it when the club was near bankruptcy.

The Racks, who were in their 60s at the time, lived in Fort Lauderdale during the winter and trusted 7 Springs to their children, Janice Sherman and Norman Rack, who also had their kids working at the course. The Colony West members approached Rack about buying

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Golf course superintendents Mark (left) and Dale Kuehner with their mother, Janice Sherman.

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The view of 7 Springs' first hole from outside the clubhouse. Eddie Rack purchased the course in 1955.

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the club because they knew he owned 7 Springs and was an experienced operator of a public course, to which they wanted to convert Colony West.

But the family couldn't get the deal done without putting 7 Springs up as collateral to purchase Colony West. Alas, the deal stalled.

That's when Mark Kuehner, the Racks' grandson, entered the picture.

At the time the deal was being discussed, Mark's brother, Dale, was attending Penn State University and studying agronomy. The family business plan called for Dale to be golf course superintendent at 7 Springs. But Mark, Dale's younger brother who was leaving the Navy soon, had no firm plans for his future. While Mark longed to return to the family business where he had worked as a teenager, there wasn't a spot for him or enough money to pay him so he could make a decent living.

Realizing this, Gen began to rethink her position on the Colony West deal. She wanted badly for Mark to work in the family business. She also realized the acquisition would give future family members the chance to work and grow in an expanded family business.

Gen decided that putting 7 Springs up as collateral to make the deal was worth it if it meant opportunities for

Mark and others. The deal was made shortly thereafter.

It was decided Dale would move to Florida to become director of golf maintenance at Colony West, and Mark would become superintendent of 7 Springs upon his departure from the Navy.

"I can't describe how appreciative I was to have grandparents like that who were willing to make that sacrifice," says Mark, now in his 23rd year as superintendent of 7 Springs. "They could've told me, 'We can't do it. You'll have to get a job elsewhere.'"

It was not lost upon Mark at the time that his aging grandparents had little to fall back on if Colony West would've continued to flounder and sunk the family business.

"The kids working in the business were young enough to move onto to other things, but my grandparents were too old to learn a new trade," he says. "They took a huge risk."

ON A RECENT sun-splashed day, Mark, Dale and their mother, Janice Sherman, visit a memory plaque located in a garden near the 7 Springs clubhouse. The plaque is in memory of Gen, who died Jan. 12, 2009, at 93. It reads: "Loving and caring in all her ways. Generous to

the end of her days. Sincere and true in heart and mind. A beautiful memory she leaves behind."

The brothers and their mother will never forget Gen and the legacy she left behind. Gen knew little if anything about turfgrass maintenance, but she knew a lot about family maintenance. She was the family's calming force. "Family first" was Gen's motto.

"The business was an extension of the family," Janice says. "The business was never going to shatter the family if she had anything to do with it."

If there were disagreements between family members, Gen made sure they were smoothed out, says Janice, who called her mother the "gentle authority."

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"We were always instilled with the message that family is the most important thing you'll ever have," Janice says.

"Gram," as the grandchildren called Gen, made everyone in the family realize the importance of family, the 45-year-old Mark says.

"She made us realize that material things don't mean squat if you don't have a good family behind you," he says.

Eddie Rack, who's 96 now, began the family business with Gen in the 1950s. The two were married 75 years.

"It was a Depression-type story," the 47-year-old Dale says of how the family business was born.

Eddie's father died when he was a young boy. He had four siblings and had to help his mother support the family. Eddie caddied at the Youghiogheny Country Club, where he met a lot of influential people, including W.D.

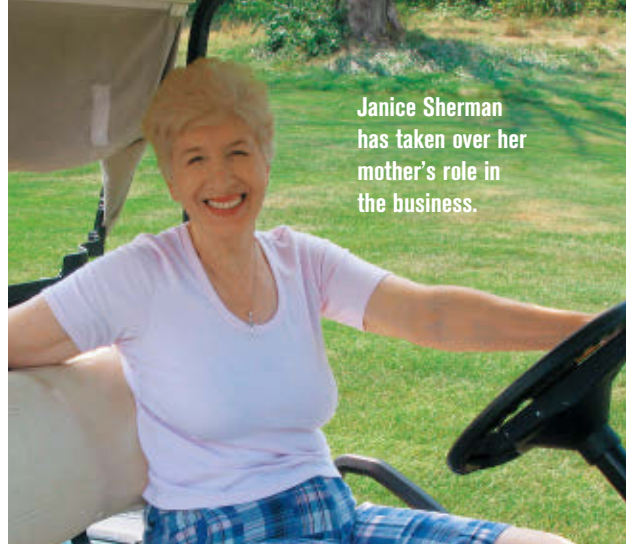
Mansfield, who convinced Eddie not to drop out of high school and later gave him a job at his newspaper after graduation. Mansfield, who was also the president of a Pittsburgh bank, later loaned Rack the money to buy 7 Springs.

"They made the deal on a handshake," Janice says.

The Rack family wasn't rich. They put a lot of the money they made back into the golf course.

Eddie has enabled the business to Janice, who lives on 7 Springs. While Dale and Mark make any decisions related to golf course agronomics, they report to their mother, who has the final say on matters. Dale calls his 70-year-old mother an "intense individual."

"It's amazing how hard she works," he says.



Janice Sherman has taken over her mother's role in the business.

Janice has also assumed Gen's role in the business. "She's the matriarch of the family and keeps us all together and grounded," Dale says.

Dale's sister Lynne and cousin Tracy operate the 7 Springs pro shop with Janice. The Kuehner children's stepfather, Robert Sherman, is a starter. Their cousin Craig is the general manager of Colony West, and their stepbrother Toby Sherman is the pro shop manager there.

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Dale's wife, Cindy, who went with him from Pittsburgh to Fort Lauderdale, works at Colony West and takes care of human resources and payroll. They've been married 20 years.

"For any family that has been involved as long as we have in a business like this, it's amazing we get along as well as we do," Dale says.

There are no green committees at the two courses to talk about course conditions and other business. But that doesn't mean things don't get discussed. Most every family function turns into a meeting about the golf courses. It goes with the territory.

"We have a greens committee meeting at Christmas; we have one at Thanksgiving and one at every birthday party," Dale says. "If there's something wrong with the golf courses, my brother and I get grilled."



Dale and Mark Kuehner, searching for an irrigation leak at 7 Springs, say they enjoy getting their clothes dirty.

didn't want to be pegged as someone who became a superintendent just because his family appointed him to the position. "I wanted people to respect me as a superintendent," Dale says. "That's why I became certified. It didn't do a darn thing for me financially."

Mark had no formal education agronomically.

Says Mark: "It's nice when you work with family. It has its moments when it gets contentious, but it's better than working for some jerk you don't know."



DALE AND MARK HAD to learn a lot and quickly when the family acquired Colony West. Dale, who was going to Penn State when the deal was made, had to learn how to manage bermudagrass on the fly. To help him do so, he joined the local Golf Course Superintendents Association chapter in southern Florida to learn the nuances of maintaining the variety.

"When I went to my first meeting, I found out who the best superintendents were and I made friends with them right away," Dale says.

For several months, Dale oversaw 7 Springs and Colony West while Mark finished his Navy duty. He would return to Pittsburgh for a few weeks at a time in the summer to help run Seven Springs. He also returned to Pittsburgh in the winter to complete his two-year certificate program from Penn State, which he had to put on hold after moving to Florida.

Dale became a certified superintendent when he was 23, a month after he received his turfgrass certificate. He achieved certification quickly because he

But one of the first things he did after getting home from the Navy was join the Pittsburgh GCSA to learn the business. At Dale's advice, Mark also consulted the top superintendents to gain knowledge.

"It was on-the-job training," Mark says. "I made a lot of mistakes. You're not a superintendent until you kill your first 2 acres of turf."

You'd never know Dale and Mark are brothers. They don't look alike. Mark is taller and has a shock of black hair under his cap. Dale is mostly bald. They also have different personalities — Mark is more boisterous (in a good way) than the more business-like Dale. But they're similar as superintendents — both like to get down and dirty on their courses.

Dale and Mark and the family business face numerous challenges in this challenging economy. Rounds are down at 7 Springs and holding steady at Colony West. While green fees at the two courses haven't increased, maintenance costs have. The two men have looked to trim costs wherever they can to save money.

Even several family members, including Dale and Mark, took pay cuts last year to keep the business running steady.

"You have to do what you have to do," Dale says matter-of-factly.

You could say Dale, Mark and their relatives took one for the team — or in this case, the family business. ■

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