

APRIL 2020

THE BRICK

MAGAZINE

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RAISING GIRLS
IN A SOCIAL
MEDIA WORLD

Suzanne Hagopian
NO BUSINESS
LIKE FAMILY
BUSINESS



Photo by John Sobczak

No Business Like Family Business with Suzanne Hagopian

by Kristen Domingue

It's fascinating to have a conversation with someone about a company that sells, repairs, and cleans rugs, only to discover how many lives it touches in our community and across the world. It's easy to think that a local store simply operates in a vacuum, but that is the exact opposite of what happens with Hagopian World of Rugs and Cleaning Services. Suzanne Hagopian, Vice President of this family business, showed us how one family can make a world of difference – literally.

The Hagopian history

My grandfather, an Armenian immigrant from Turkey, started the business in 1939. Though he landed in New York, he came to Detroit to work for the Ford Motor Company because they paid \$5 a day. That was a big deal back then.

Unfortunately, he and his family had a tough time financially, despite the great day-wage. So, he always thought of ways to make money on the side. He was a pharmacist and he could compound medicines, which meant neighbors sought him out when they were ill. Everything they needed, he made. Because my grandfather had a chemist's background, he made shampoo, hair dye, paint, and so many other things. He also created and sold perfume to coworkers and others in our community.

One day, while listening to a call-in radio program about

solving common household problems, someone called in with ink stains on their carpet and wanted to know how to remove them. Carpet back then was all wool – completely natural fibers – something he was used to working with. He heard the host tell the caller that ink is the worst kind of stain; the caller would need to replace their carpet. My grandfather called the radio station to get in touch with the caller with the stain and told them he could remove it, free of charge, as an experiment. He went over, got the stain out, and that's how things got started.

He had a medical bag with all his chemicals and tools, and he began to visit the well-to-do neighborhoods once or twice a month for a set amount of money to clean their carpets. Most carpet cleaners of the time used coconut oil shampoos that left a sticky residue, which accelerated re-soiling. My grandfather used his chemistry background and developed proprietary, non-residue cleaning agents.



This expanded over the years. He invented a procedure for wall-to-wall carpet dying. Much later, Oriental rugs were becoming popular, and people asked if he could make a carpet smaller to fit a new room in a new house which became an important part of our business.

My father joined the business once he graduated college. He and my grandfather were similar in so many ways. He had a very entrepreneurial spirit and eventually, my dad wanted to expand our business further. Because we cleaned rugs and repaired and



dyed them, it was only natural we should sell them, too. He learned everything he could about rugs and discovered his love for oriental rugs. He always loved art and I remember him saying 'beautiful design can change your life.'

Deciding to become the third generation

In 1976, my father and his older brother split over operational differences. This was a devastating moment in our family history; it was a very trying time for my dad and grandfather to get through. My father eventually bought out both brothers and renamed our business "The Original Hagopian," since his brother started his own carpet cleaning business. That was also when dad established purple as our corporate color, and had all our vehicles painted that color to make sure people knew that it was our company.

My grandfather died in 1978. He was 80, and it was a shock to us because he was a strong man. He was a very determined person. My dad and grandfather were very close. We could all see this was very difficult for my dad; I never saw him that emotional or upset. That period of time was when I really started thinking seriously about the family business, its legacy, and who would continue it after my father. It was a turning point in my life.

Initially, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do or what my future would be. To be honest, I didn't think I was going to end up in the family business. My parents never pushed us in a particular direction. They wanted all of us to do what we were passionate about. Looking back now, it's kind of interesting to me that we all ended up working in the business and came to that decision independent of each other. I loved music and played string instruments in primary school, and at one point, I thought I might teach music to children.

When I first joined the business, I answered the phones. I was the receptionist! I was eventually moved into accounting and inventory management, and shifted through various positions. That was part of how we were trained; that gave us a sense of how the business worked overall. Each of us started at the bottom and worked our way up. This enhanced how much we valued the company, its people, and how it runs. It was the best way for us to learn all aspects of our business and it gave us the strong moral values we hold to this day.

In time, my father began to ease back on the-day-to-day activities, and that allowed all of us to step into the business in a bigger way. He was still chairman and attended all of our meetings, but he left us to work things out together. To him, it was most important that the family



stay united and that the business didn't break our relationship with one another. He made sure he taught us how to listen to each other, our vendors, and our customers.

There is a strong work ethic in my family. We all have different strengths, and I think my dad was very smart in suggesting different positions where there wasn't a lot of overlap. I'm very proud and grateful to be able to work with my brother and sister.

Currently, my brother Edmond is the company's president. My sister Angela is the Vice President of Operations and runs all of our systems. I sit in the Executive Vice President role. Part of my work is to handle the appraising and buying of hand-knotted and antique rugs. I'm headquartered in Birmingham, and I manage the store here.

The day-to-day is all about relationships

In our business, many of our team members have been with us for 25 years or more. We've known them since they were kids. For us, work and family are all intertwined.

My father started to take me on buying trips with him, and that's where I learned how important reputation is in our business. We take pride in everything we do. On our buying trips, I saw how vendors extended themselves. This is the kind of business where formal contracts don't really exist. We buy thousands and thousands of dollars worth of rugs on a handshake. It's such a small industry where everybody knows everybody and your reputation means everything. I'm proud of the fact that we've maintained our reputation over three generations.

I've always loved rugs. I love merchandising and selecting rugs that our customers will want to own. I look at hundreds of rugs in order to hand-select maybe 40 or 50. I

enjoy traveling, meeting new people, and learning about other cultures, because it's taught me more about my own culture and how fortunate I am to live in a country with so much freedom. I realize how important diversity is to me personally and how crucial it is to have people from various backgrounds working in our company. I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with people that are so different from one another.

I'm really proud of our reputation in the market. I'm also proud of the fact that we're a close family and not only do we work together, we enjoy spending time together.

How making an impact is part of how we've made it last

My dad started a collaborative with the College for Creative Studies over 30 years ago where we sponsor a student design competition. We eventually expanded the competition to include the Henry Ford Academy High School. Each year, the winning design is created into a rug, which is custom-made for display in the CCS student show in May. It is an inspiration to work with such creative people.

We also host a concert series called Nightnotes through the Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings. We started this over 20 years ago. This has grown to be a much-loved annual event that has grown in popularity in the community.

We source our rugs from suppliers who have similar values around quality, craftsmanship, and who also value family and community. It's important to us that we can give back in a socially conscious way. For example, several of our Tibetan rug suppliers had a fundraiser after the earthquake in Nepal and we sent money to support them. We see that we can do a lot for these communities, and make a difference where we can.

It's so easy in our business for someone in a more developed country to take advantage of a supplier in a less developed country. We see it happen all the time, where communities who create extraordinary work end up with less than what they should be paid, or are forced to produce an inferior product. This happens when the company they do business with on the retail side doesn't care about the wool or the income of the people and the weavers who create the rugs. We know our sources and

put emphasis on working with people of integrity. We are one of the few companies that are able to repair and restore authentic hand-made rugs. We repair antique, vintage, and even new rugs. When extensive repairs are required, we can send rugs overseas to our workroom in Egypt. There we can reweave a hole, or refinish the entire end of a rug if it has become damaged, frayed, or completely come apart.

Just as much as it matters to us to treat our employees, vendors, and partners from around the world well, and participate in our community, it's also essential to us to take care of our customers right here at home. It's fun to find that perfect rug for a client. The process still motivates and challenges me. We love to help our customers create a personal interior space in their home, and a beautiful rug can do that.

We curate our unique selection by offering a wide variety including contemporary Tibetan, traditional one-of-a-kind, tribal, and antique rugs. We know that sometimes our customers don't have the budget for an imported, hand-knotted rug, and we have a lot of options that are less expensive and always available. With the new machine-made and flat-woven techniques, you can get something that's a perfect match for your budget and your décor.



More amazing details about the Hagopian history can be found on their website OriginalHagopian.com, where you'll also find the legacy started by Suzanne's grandfather, Haroutan Hagopian, alive and well. It's wonderful to see how a business started by an immigrant who had nothing upon arriving in America can stand the test of time. Suzanne's story reminds us all of how the roots of a deep family bond become the fertile tree that can become a backbone of its community. We wish Suzanne and the Hagopian family continued success and meaningful connections in the web they weave.



Kristen M. Domingue is a copywriter and content marketing consultant in the New York City area. When she's not delivering on client projects, you can find her cooking up something gluten-free or in an internet rabbit hole on entrepreneurship or astrology.