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Pretty comfortable after 80 years in the furniture business (Business Buzz)



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier
Nick Gates, owner of Gates Furniture, sits in his Grants Pass showroom. The store is celebrating its 80th year.

By Kathleen Alaks of the Daily Courier

Nick Gates has a simple explanation for why his family's retail furniture business in Grants Pass has been so successful for the past eight decades: It's something he calls "the Gates Way."

The Gates Way, he said, is about working hard, about treating customers like family and treating employees with respect, about selling quality products and standing behind those products, about being involved in and supporting the community.

In other words, it's about decency and doing the right thing.

"We are working to make your home a better place to live in, and to make your community a better place to live in," Gates said Tuesday as he reflected on his family's legacy.

Gates Furniture & Mattress is celebrating its 80th year in business in Grants Pass. George Gates Jr., Nick's grandfather, opened Gates Furniture in 1946, in a 5,000-square-foot building at Seventh and H streets.

He ran the business for six years, giving it a firm foundation, until 1952, when he contracted a severe case of polio. The disease left him quadriplegic and confined to respiratory equipment for the rest of his life.

His wife Lois took over running the business. She would do so for the next 25 years.

After George died in 1972, Lois considered selling the business, but her son John, known as Giff, showed an interest in running the store, where he had been helping out since he had been in high school.

He returned from college in 1973 to work at the store, gradually taking over more responsibility from his mother. He became store manager in 1977 and continued the tradition his parents had built.

Lois stayed involved in the business, not officially retiring until 2010 at age 88.

In the early 1990s, the store moved to a larger space at Sixth and L streets. The store expanded in that space and today has grown to 30,000 square feet. The mattress showroom is just behind the store on L street and the warehouse is another 30,000-square-foot space on I Street, behind the Grants Pass Boys & Girls Club.

Giff continued managing the business until 2009, when Nick came on board.

Nick originally had planned to become a photojournalist, but the advent of the iPhone and its photographic capabilities caused him to rethink his career path. He graduated from the University of Oregon business school in 2009 and went right into the family business.

"I grew up in the store. I was on the payroll since 2000, sweeping, loading delivery trucks, working in the warehouse," he said.

"I grew up in the business so it was always there in the back of my mind. Now, I am committed to being here."

Nick, 39, said he doesn't feel pressured to live up to the legacy left behind by his grandparents and father. Rather, "It's one continuing legacy that I am a part of. I'm here to foster that legacy, for almost 20 years now."

One part of that legacy that Nick is especially proud of is the store's ongoing support of the community that surrounds it, the community that keeps the business in business.

George was involved with the chamber of commerce and the Lions Club. Lois was a founding member of the Rogue Community College Foundation and the Grants Pass YMCA, and benefactor of the Grants Pass Boys & Girls Club, the Grants Pass High School Performing Arts Center and the Grants Pass Rotary Club's Duck Derby. In 2007 she was the first recipient of the now-annual Dutch Schultz service award by the Four Way Community Foundation.

Giff also supported the duck derby and hosted Monte Carlo night fundraisers throughout the 1990s. Continuing the tradition, last fall, Gates hosted a miniature golf tournament, the Living Room Invitational, to raise money for the planned children's museum in Grants Pass.

"We raised over $60,000 in one evening," Nick said.

Another tournament is planned this fall.

The store also supports Main Street Grants Pass, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Rogue Valley, the Rogue Valley and Grants Pass YMCA, Southern Oregon Aspire, Options for Southern Oregon, and Kairos.

"I'm very proud of that list," Nick said. "We try to engage with the community as best we can."

Gates has 25 employees, many of them who have been working there more than 20 years. Two have been there 40 years.

"I think that says something about who we are as a company," Nick said.

Gates Furniture & Mattress is at 700 S.W. Sixth St. The store is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.