

Cover Story

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Right-Sized Retail

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Madison Williams fondly recalls her school-aged years when the bus dropped her off at her grandma's house, where the original Boulevard Flowers in Colonial Heights, Virginia, stood. It started as a hobby for Maybelle and George Landa, then grew into a business as they added more greenhouses.

"I'd watch movies in the basement and color," Madison says. "I'm sure I was there almost as much as I was at home."

Her parents, Mark and Francine Landa, had taken over the reins of the retail operation by then, and like so many kids who grew up in the business, Madison's first job was running the garden center cash register. Valentine's Day consisted of de-thorning roses, and in spring, she did whatever was needed around the business.

"Once I graduated from college I came back and started to do more on the back end and the business side," she adds.

By 2007, Mark and Francine had built a 33,000-sq. ft. retail store to cater to the growing demands of the area, unaware of the economic downturn that was about to strike.

"I don't think any of us knew how to operate that largely," Madison says of the new structure. "We filled it for the sake of filling it. We experimented with a lot of different categories—we had a café, pet supplies. They were outside of our comfort area, but we had all this space."

A World Away

Madison's line to garden center ownership wasn't a straight one and that works in her favor. You may have read in her June *Green Profit* essay the sage advice Mark gave her when she asked about what she should major in if she

was interested in taking over the business. He told her to major in what she was passionate about, and if she was still interested in the business, he would teach her what she needed to know.

That led to a double major in International Affairs and German from Virginia Commonwealth University, a graduate degree in International Government Policy with emphasis on Environmental Issues from Virginia Tech and a study abroad in Austria.

“I just took my whole perspective outside [the green industry] and turned it back in—I’m looking at it more from a policy standpoint,” she says of her college experience. “It’s kind of what made me come back because I don’t think our industry was weighted enough from a political platform.”

She adds she would like to get more involved in the industry from a policy level, and she sees how it’s possible to push some of those policy messages through the business and into the community, particularly on topics like the pollinator crisis and understanding local food sources.

Within a year of grad school she married her husband, Mike Williams, an accountant, and they moved to Boston for three years. “I told them [her family] it would be temporary—once I came back for good I wasn’t going to go anywhere else.”

During her time in Boston she gained experience working for an interior commercial plantscaping company that excelled in sustainable designs.

“[The owner] was so wonderful to work with, and it was a great experience for me to be an employee and not an employer. I knew I was coming back here full time, but I used that experience to prep myself to try and develop skill sets from my boss up there that I wanted to bring back here. Once we moved back, I was fully committed.”

Right-Sizing the Retail

Once Madison moved back from Boston, she and her sister Casey Landa began the transition to co-owners, as Mark and Francine pulled back to a more flexible schedule. But both Madison and Casey knew they didn’t want the stress of a 33,000-sq. ft. retail space. Instead, Mark sold 13 acres of the land to an auto dealership and they built a new retail operation on another part of the property, called Boulevard Flower Gardens at Ruffin Mill, which has 4,500 sq. ft. of flexible retail space near the 13 production greenhouses that crank out annuals, perennials, mums and poinsettias. The new retail opened in September 2018.

“We’re growing the same amount, just shuffling it over more frequently,” Madison describes. “The idea was to avoid some of those overhead costs in the off season from that larger structure.

“We’re more efficient in-season with labor and we wanted to create a building that was versatile enough to be able to be used for other uses besides retail.”

Those other uses include events and weddings, and they’re bringing in more revenue than ever.

“We’re at the point where we have to hire an event and education coordinator,” Madison adds. “To do it well, we have to bring someone in to organize and schedule it. We’re in the hiring process now to do that—we’re really grateful for a great first year.”

Facing the Challenges

Though the smaller retail location with more events has definitely helped profitability, there are, of course, always challenges to overcome. Madison says some of their challenges include labor and keeping long-term employees working, even during the slower seasons.

Another challenge has been redefining the traditional garden center without alienating the very loyal customer base that's shopped there for (in some cases) decades.

"Our presence in the community is positive," she says. "People come here for quality plants and advice, so we're not looking to rebrand."

Instead, she adds, they're identifying fading trends, dissecting the numbers and trying to home in on what consumers are needing today.

"That's why we've had success through the transitions. Right now, we have a lot of Baby Boomers still in our community," she notes. "We are trying to appeal to target an audience of a younger generation and urban gardeners, too. We're trying to find that balance of what the traditional garden center should look like today."

For now, that looks like more houseplants, DIY workshops, fairy succulent gardens, herbs and veggies, container gardening, and even some possible future yoga in the garden center (Madison is a certified yoga instructor). It also means fresh flowers, some online sales that are either delivered or picked up in store, events and a pumpkin patch with family activities (creating a lasting emotional experience that people will come back for year after year).

On the Future and Family

Madison is by no means in this business alone and that means the world to her. Alongside her sister Casey she shares in the successes and challenges, and enjoys raising her growing family in the garden center environment. Her husband Mike works outside the family business and they have 3-year-old Iris, 1-year-old Jack and a soon to be new family member coming in November (they're Team Green for this one, meaning they don't know if it'll be a boy or a girl).

"I'm feeling a lot of chaos in my life at one time, but it's been fun and it might almost be easier for me because I have some flexibility in having this business and having my family here," Madison says of life as a working mom. "My parents live on the same property and it's easy for my mom to help me."

"Now it's really important to me, though, to work smarter and not harder. I must find time to schedule for myself and family."

She credits all her family members for where they are today, too.

"It's been so overwhelmingly nice to be nominated for this award and to have all this support," she says. "It's hard for me to accept this credit—at home I feel like I'm constantly trying to figure this out and clear these obstacles."



"I don't know I'd consider us a success story; it's just where we are in our journey. I definitely couldn't do any of this without my family. It is still very much a team effort and I'm grateful to have them here." **GP**

By the Numbers: Boulevard Flower Gardens

Founded: 1955—on the third generation of owners

Relocated & expanded retail: 2007 (33,000 sq. ft.)

Rebuilt & downsized retail: 2018 (4,500 sq. ft.)

2018-19 Sales: \$1.5 million

Top 5 categories: Annuals, Perennials, Shrubs, Bagged Goods, Florist

Employees: 10 full-time, 15 part-time