

Eye on Business — Partners in Love and Business

(Milford Magazine 2005)

By Ronnie Ann Ryan

Who says you can't mix business with pleasure?

There are many couples who are not only strong advocates for mixing career and marriage, but are living proof that such a combination can produce great results. In fact, Milford has its fair share of dynamic duos happy to discuss the special benefits and challenges that come with the territory of living and working together.

What's the common thread among all these couples? Everyone wanted to spend more time together. These couples have chosen a life and work style that promotes togetherness and teamwork, and are thriving as they focus on the common goal of building a business.

Prior to starting The Billboard Network, Bob and Priscilla Soltes each had their own separate businesses. When they got married two years ago, they decided to create something new together. The Billboard Network offers customers indoor billboard-like ads and brochure dispensing in local shopping malls and other high traffic areas such as M&M Farms and the Athenian Diner. This innovative advertising medium is being well received by a wide range of companies and is helping local businesses build awareness and increase traffic and clientele.

What really works for the Soltes team is playing off each other's strengths. Priscilla is very good with the computer and customer service, while Bob has the tenacity for finding new "Billboard" locations and making sales. "Plus, being a husband and wife team is economical too!" says Priscilla.

Of course this type of arrangement does have its challenges. According to Priscilla, "Sometimes when we disagree, it's like 'Clash of the Titans.'" They laugh easily and Bob admits that it's not always simple for two entrepreneurs used to running their own shows to come to an agreement, but they manage. The couple talks earnestly about the importance of respecting each other and understanding both sides of an issue. Priscilla shares her method for handling rough spots: "Count to 10, and if that doesn't work, count to 20." It's very clear these two have found productive ways to keep things moving and are enjoying their joint entrepreneurial adventure.

Lily and Charlie Flannigan had a long-term desire to run a bed and breakfast and the Lily Pad Bed & Breakfast (located at 44 Prospect Street) is the realization of that shared dream. The couple's incredibly warm nature and easy-going style has created a wonderful haven for travelers; the B&B boasts nicely decorated rooms, a romantic gazebo out back, and delicious homemade breakfasts. What

makes them click as partners? “We really complement each other and work as a team,” says Lily. “I am an early riser, so I take care of guests in the morning. Charlie likes to stay up late, so he greets the late night arrivals.” Married for 43 years, this is a couple who have mastered the art of communicating and enjoying their life and their time together.

Dan and Cathy Craft opened the Harborview Café across from Milford Harbor to have more time together. Now, they actually get to see each other -- a huge improvement from their previous schedules where Dan would leave the house early in the morning and Cathy commuted 50 miles each way to her corporate job, often returning after a 12-hour day. Currently, Cathy works at the cafe with Dan from 10-3, squeezes in the bookkeeping and administrative duties when she can, and still has time to take care of their 4 year-old son, Ryan.

Naturally, working side by side does present some issues. “Sometimes we snap at each other, but we never bring it home.” Cathy explains that they have learned to simply let things go, understanding that peak times in a restaurant can be stressful.

Dr. Laurel Lobovits and her husband Dr. Ilan Kinori, owners of Café Atlantique, both share a great love of European cafes and architecture. When they discovered the historic building on the corner River Street was going to be torn down, they wanted to save it. They couple enjoyed restoring the property, and are thrilled that the Café Atlantique has become a warm and comfortable place for customers to sip a caramel latte, work on a lap top, enjoy the work of local artists, and listen to acoustic music.

This hard working pair have found their own niches which leverage their natural strengths; Laurel runs the café, manages the staff, books the artists and musicians, while Ilan handles the advertising and marketing. But Laurel notes, “Either one of us will take out the trash!” Because the doctors have been together since high school, they have a communication style that’s easy. And Laurel pointed out that meshing the café business with family was a lot easier than when she worked as a radiologist.

What tips do Milford’s love and business partners have to offer other couples considering this path? Amazingly, the advice was very consistent.

- Before starting your own business, make sure you both have the same burning desire and are truly committed.” advises Bob Soltes.
- “Find your strengths and stick to them,” Cathy Craft suggests. This was echoed by every couple and is a great advantage when working as a team.
- “Listen. Be sure to keep the lines of communication open,” advises Lily Flannigan. All partners acknowledged that talking things through was the only way to keep the business and relationship running smoothly.

- “Set limits for discussing business or it can over run your life,” says Dr. Laurel Lobovitz, who with her husband Dr. Ilan Kinori, owns Café Atlantique.
- Strive for life balance. Schedule time with each other, family members, and friends. All the couples agree that balance is very important for maintaining a healthy relationship.