

# Celebrating the Pleasures of Today's Sophisticated Family Lifestyle

# Chester County LIFE


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## A Family Business Like No Other Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center

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# A Family Business Like No Other Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center

Anyone who has shopped at Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center will attest to superior customer service, exemplary expertise, and phenomenal products. Cliff, Mary Ann, Ann Marie, and Bob wrote the formula that spells success with a capital R for relationships.

BY SUSAN I. SHIBER

Success formulas come in almost as many shapes and sizes as the folks who devise them. For one expert, the key is hands-on management. Another prominent leader stresses a non-restrictive approach. Think like Iacocca. Act like Einstein. Pounce like Trump. Take baby steps. Leap and soar. And on and on ad infinitum.

The truth is, what works for one company, may be the downfall of the next. Yet, a majority of profitable business owners share a common philosophy. They believe building relationships is the ballast fortifying their ship. This is the story of one family with a very strong vessel supported by alliances spanning the world.

## PARTNERS IN LIFE AND BUSINESS

The year was 1983. A former movie and television star (Ronald Reagan) was President, Space Shuttle Challenger made its inaugural flight, and Sally Ride became the first American woman in space. Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings took the reins as sole news anchors, *Terms of Endearment* won five Academy

Awards, including best picture, and *Flashdance* set off an aerobic dance craze. Families in Chester County rejoiced when the Philadelphia 76ers captured the NBA championship by defeating the L.A. Lakers, welcomed the new Disney Channel to TV, and joined more than 125 million Americans to say farewell to *M\*A\*S\*H* as it aired its final episode.

Another high point for local residents that year was the opening of a fascinating new store in West Chester. Clifford and Mary Ann Wolfe made a bold decision after he learned his job would be eliminated because of a corporate merger. They decided to establish a business and delved deeply into due diligence and research. At the time, two of their four children were in high school and one attended college. Perhaps it wasn't the ideal time to take such a dramatic plunge into the unknown.



Turns out, it really was a prophetic period to trust their judgment. New residential construction was on the cusp of exploding, prompting a need for interior and exterior home accessories. The couple cushioned abundant study with ample prayer and decided a retail store featuring Baldwin Brass hardware, fixtures, and reproduction lighting would attract customers. For artistic flair, a wide range of glass, copper, and chrome gift items would enhance attractive hardware inventory.

In preparation, the Wolfes attended a training course and became certified to sell Baldwin products. Cliff also completed installation instruction. The couple chose a storefront in soon-to-be burgeoning downtown West Chester, held their breath, and introduced Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center. Though married for 32 years, this new style of partnership presented a learning curve. Mary Ann still wanted to be treated as a wife, not a co-worker, which Cliff quickly accepted. As customer count increased, Mary Ann adjusted to working outside their

home and her husband to a seven-day week instead of five.

Early on, much to their delight, business was healthy. Residents nearby and farther away were thrilled to find complete lines of Baldwin Brass hardware and a large stock of distinctive gift choices. Observing a strong real estate climate with buyers looking for homes in outlying suburbs and quaint villages, they agreed to take another courageous step by opening a second store in Chadds Ford.

Fifteen years later, no longer retail neophytes, Cliff and Mary Ann intuited a move to Malvern, a joint effort between Cliff and Mary Ann and daughter Ann Marie and her husband Bob. Ann Marie notes, "Bob and I spent about two years looking at possible sites for our store. We found the property at Malvern and brought my parents in to check it out. We all decided it was the ideal location. Bob oversaw the renovation of the building, and a few months later we opened the store. The original thought was to keep all three stores open until Malvern

was established. We estimated this would take about five years. We were pleased to find that Malvern took off very quickly, and West Chester was closed about a year later. We closed Olde Ridge a couple years after that to focus solely on building the Malvern business." The store is in a 4,200-square-foot shop ideally positioned on downtown King Street. Malvern's rich heritage, increasing population, and dedication to family values echoed the family's business philosophy and lifestyle. The store was welcomed with open arms by both nearby merchants and clientele. Success promptly followed. And so did the Wolfe kids.

### THE NEXT GENERATION

Three of their children and three grandchildren, Bobby, Olivia, and Daniel, have worked in the store. Daughter Ann Marie Gillinger grew up loving her parents' shop and took a keen interest in growing the business. When Cliff and Mary Ann decided it was time to retire, Ann Marie and her husband Bob purchased Wolfe's. Along

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*With Ann Marie and Bob at the helm, Wolfe's has evolved to Malvern landmark status. Ann Marie and Bob actually met at the Chadds Ford store. He recalls finding excuses to purchase gadgets and gadgets just so he could see Ann Marie. He never dreamed his future would be part of this exciting business. "It was my good fortune I needed hardware on a day Ann Marie was working."*

with several employees, they are certified by Baldwin to sell the manufacturer's plethora of products. And Ann Marie points out, "In recent years, Bob and I have expanded the brands we sell so that our customers have lots of options. We sell products from over 100 manufacturers. Some brand names besides Baldwin are Rocky Mountain, Emtek, Ashley Norton, LB Brass, Valli & Valli, Top Knobs, Schaub, Classic Hardware, and much, much more."

Cliff and Mary Ann are happily flitting about Bethany Beach, Delaware. Ann Marie says, "Dad keeps busy, sometimes driving senior groups to New York City to see Broadway shows," reports Ann Marie. "Mom loves visits from grandchildren and makes lavish amounts of food for them. They have absolutely settled into retirement life."

Ann Marie and Bob actually met at the Chadds Ford store. He recalls finding excuses to purchase gadgets and gadgets just so he could see Ann Marie. He never dreamed his future would be part of this exciting business. "It was my good fortune I needed hardware on a day Ann Marie was working. As they say, the rest is history."

That history, still in the making, has been bright. Family-owned businesses, such as Wolfe's, continue to be the mainstay of the American economy. They exhibit valuable entrepreneurial spirit and earn a greater return on investment than non-family firms. Another trait among family-owned businesses is large participation by women. In fact, nearly 60% of these companies have women in top management positions.

With Ann Marie and Bob at the helm, Wolfe's has evolved to Malvern landmark status. Lydia Willits Bartholomew, Chairman of the Board of National Bank of Malvern, remembers when Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center was the new kid on the block. "Our bank helped the firm from the beginning; I have worked with two generations of owners. Malvern is very lucky to have such astute business people. Bob and Ann Marie are so warm, caring, and truly devoted to their family. They embody all that is great about Chester County."

Lydia is not only Wolfe's banker. She's a customer. "The store is simply beautiful, the products so stylish, and Bob and Ann Marie are positive in all they do. He is such a go-to guy. When we expanded the bank, everything was fitted by Wolfe's. We bought hardware, lighting, and other accessories. The Gillingers have very high standards, which we appreciate as a bank – and as a customer," she concludes.

Others feel the same way. They seek out Wolfe's not only for its vast selection, but for its camaraderie, too. The commitment shared by Ann Marie, Bob, and the entire staff to build and nurture relationships does not go unnoticed.

"We deal with companies and people all over the world," points out Ann Marie. "Bob and I feel as if we are part of their lives, too. They are certainly part of ours. It's not just about making a dollar. It's about service and friendships. People move away, and they take us with them. One customer's daughter built a home in North Carolina and came here to buy hardware. A woman flew in from out of state, took a cab to the store, selected hardware and gifts, then immediately went back home. Her only purpose for the trip was to shop at Wolfe's."

Other customers, too numerous to count, place Wolfe's on the same high pedestal as these women. Recently, a man popped in to purchase products for a home addition and asked Ann Marie to: "Tell your father that one of his old customers was here."

## PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE MASTERY

This gentleman and everyone who walks through the door are warmed by welcome. "When people come to Wolfe's, they are our guests," says Ann Marie. "We may get the sale, we may not. But I still prefer shoppers to know we are excited to see them and to



catch up with what is happening in their lives. The store is a connecting spot, and customers are extended family."

It is a fusion of this cordiality and total understanding of each and every product carried that sets Wolfe's apart. It has earned a reputation as a destination store, a problem solver, *the* place to go for answers. Ann Marie taxes her memory and recalls when her parents opened the store, there were five hardware finishes. Now there are hundreds. Wolfe's also offers hardware from local blacksmiths, tailor-made recycled items, and pieces fabricated from original castings and dies. Specialists refit and refinish existing hardware bringing it to its historical beauty. And, without question, the array of gifts is extraordinary.

On any given day, someone is astonished by Wolfe's. "Not long ago," notes Ann Marie, "a new customer told us he was literally exhausted by his fruitless search for a specific part to match others in his home. My reply was: *Oh is that all you need?* Another individual wanted simple hardware for a Dutch door. Her reaction after visiting Wolfe's: *I've literally been on this quest for three months, and you solved my problem in five minutes.*"

An indefatigable drive to provide outstanding service and products to suit every budget leads numerous builders to Wolfe's. "Years ago, I began making cold calls to builders at their construction sites," recalls Bob. "One afternoon, I showed two men in a trailer one of our locksets. They loved it, bought sets for all the houses in that community, and we still work with them today. In fact, there are many builders from the beginning who continue to call on us for products and advice."

"Advice," chuckles Ann Marie. "Builders sometimes ask Bob to resolve problems caused by products we don't even supply. One company wanted hardware, not in our stock, from an overseas manufacturer. They purchased it somewhere else and nothing worked. Bob contacted the manufacturer, had custom parts made, and to this day all is perfect."

This pleased builder is not alone in his reliance on Bob's expertise and Wolfe's wealth of products. "I've purchased from Wolfe's since 1992 when I was with another builder," says Doug Hartz. "After I started Hartz Custom Homes, I carried on the relationship. When big box stores began popping

up, some small companies were hurt. However, Wolfe's has gone up against these giants and has actually fared better. Why? Because of customer care and the special services the store offers. You get the whole package with Wolfe's, not just a lock or piece of hardware. Wolfe's has anything we need from a mailbox to locks controlled by Android or iPhone, and Bob's product comprehension is incomparable."

Pete Tummillo, owner of Pete Tummillo & Sons, and Pohlig Builders selection coordinator Cathy Carr concur with Hartz. Pete first worked with Ann Marie's dad. "Our customers' expectations are always realized. That's important. Whether it's a million dollar home or a small house, everyone is treated with equal respect and professionalism by Wolfe's."

"Bob and the Wolfe's team are fantastic," adds Cathy. "Ann Marie and Bob know their





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business and understand our clients, as well. They check and double-check everything to ensure it is undeniably correct. Wolfe's does whatever it can to meet our needs."

"I inherited Wolfe's," remarks Jesse Patterson, owner of Patterson Builders, LLC. "I was a superintendent on a job, and Wolfe's was the hardware supplier. When you have a good relationship with somebody you don't change it, so I brought Bob along when I started my business. Sometimes we do restorations of very old homes, and Bob goes the extra mile to provide ideal matches. He can adapt and make things work in any budget or style from sleek European to cozy cottage. Clients opt for our services because of my strict attention to detail. I go to Wolfe's for the same reason."

A custom bar, media room, and wine cellar enriched by Wolfe's products and Bob's resourcefulness highlights Jesse's praise. The hardware, rustic in style, is finished in deep bronzes and satin nickel. A dark bronze lever was used in concert with a seven-inch arched escutcheon plate to set off wine and media room doors. A concealed catch and finger pull were installed to minimize hardware and allow stained glass windows to be the center of attention. Cabinet hardware on a Murphy bed features pewter twist knobs

and pulls that complement iron scroll work. "Because Bob completely understood the many schemes of this space, the room is flawless," emphasizes Jesse.

And here we are full circle back to success formulas. Anyone who has shopped at Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center will attest to superior customer service, exemplary expertise, and phenomenal products. In conclu-

sion, Cliff, Mary Ann, Ann Marie, and Bob wrote the formula that spells success with a capital R for relationships. **CCL**

#### **Wolfe's Baldwin Brass Center**

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*Pictured with Ann Marie and Bob are their children Bobby, Daniel and Olivia, all of whom have worked in the family business.*