

# Joe, Jana, and Jenise Harris— A Packaging Family Making History

By Taryn Pyle, AICC Director of Membership & Marketing Services

**It's pretty much taken** for granted that women have arrived and succeeded at every level of American Business. Our field is no exception. However, when one company has two women in key positions, it starts to get interesting. And when you realize that the two women are sisters it gets even more interesting. But don't stop there, their dad owns the company. Bingo! Sounds like a galloping case of nepotism doesn't it? Don't bet the farm on it because you'd lose it and all your seed money, too!



Sisters Jenise Cox and Jana Bickford with dad, Joe Harris.

The dad in this case is Joe Harris, and his two daughters are Jana and Jenise. The company, Harris Packaging Corporation in Haltom City, Texas, was built from the ground up by Joe and his late wife, Joyce. Joe's daughters chose college, marriage, families, and careers in completely different fields from the box business before the offer to join the family business was made.

But you can't grow up in a family where both mom and dad play very active roles without something rubbing off. As Jenise put it, "We were brought up with the attitude that you have to work harder than anyone else." This is not an uncommon attitude among entrepreneurs like Joe, and it either sends the kids packing or it brings them closer together. Fortunately, it has the latter effect on the Harris family.

Jana explained that she was only five when Joe started the business. "We definitely had

to earn our stripes," she said with very obvious pride. She's talking about winning stripes then and still winning them now. Talking with Joe, it was easy to see that he brought up his kids to understand that his approval didn't come easily, but when it was deserved it was real. No phony gold stars in this family.

**A Family Business Right from the Start** Joe Harris got his start in business back in 1976 as a broker. But it wasn't long before one of his vendors offered to sell him its sheet plant. Joe had harbored the notion that this was the way he really wanted to go and he bought the business by way of the usual route, a bank loan. "At that point, Joyce and I started learning the business the hard way, from the bottom up." Until her death in 1991, Joyce and Joe did whatever had to be done, including running the machines themselves late at night to make sure a shipment was ready for early morning delivery.

"As time moved on," Joe said, "we were able to hire more experienced people. We had a nice company. Maybe it wasn't as great as some others, but we were building it carefully. In 1987 we began a Total Quality Management Process and were one of the few

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The team of Harris Packaging Corporation.

## A Packaging Family Making History

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sheet plants with a testing lab. We had a compliment of pretty sophisticated testing equipment. In 1988 we were the pioneers in our area with a JIT (Just in Time) inventory system. This and the QC program opened many doors for us and gave us a competitive edge that few others could match.”

In the 90’s Joe created a fully owned subsidiary called American Carton Company in Mansfield, Texas that specializes in folding cartons. Growth continued in 2000 when Joe added 70,000 square feet to his existing 100,000 square feet in Haltom City. Harris Packaging was definitely humming and had become a serious competitive force in the area.

### A New Generation

The year was 2006 and Joe decided it was time to pop the question. “For years I had been apprehensive about bringing family into the business, especially after losing my wife,” he explained. “As time passed...it looked like we could make it work. My concern had been only because of the problems I had seen other family businesses have over the issue of nepotism. I had built a good team from the plant to the corporate office and I wasn’t sure the addition of family members would sit well with them. So, I did it on an as-needed basis. Key positions became available and I knew the girls had what it would take to fill them. I was right. Jenise has been our controller ever since and Jana fit into the customer service department immediately.”

Family business experts agree that Joe’s approach was the best way to go. It’s when “junior” is introduced as the

new VP in charge of nothing in particular that the troops get antsy - and with good reason. Integrating family members when vacancies appear and for which the family member has experience is actually quite comforting for the troops. It sends the signal that the owner still cares about the business and that the younger members of the family will continue to run it the way the older generation has run it.

Independently owned businesses still account for greater productivity and total gross revenue than that produced by the impersonal multi-national corporate giants. Besides, they are a lot more fun to work for!

But how did the “girls” see all of this? They both said they were “honored” when Joe made the offers. Jenise said, “Dad just loves this company. I don’t see him ever walking away. He is bringing us along as he would someone who is not his family member. This is good for us, it’s good for the company, and it’s especially important as far as all the wonderful people who work for us is concerned.”

Jana, looking at the overall picture, talked about the family as a team. She said, “Dad will let us try new things, but he keeps a careful eye on us. Nobody’s perfect and when we make mistakes, he treats us as he would treat any other employee. Just don’t make the same mistake twice.” The last line was said with a tone that showed respect for Joe as both a father and a boss.

With the integration of the new generation, Harris Packaging made some big changes. Chief among these was promotion of long-time employee, Harrell Bivens, to VP & General Manager. Joe credits him for setting the tone and laying the foundation for Harris’ future.

Implementing a Lean Manufacturing Process, with the help of Baskar Kotte from Quality Systems Enhancement, Inc., was the first step. Jana heads up the manufacturing efficiency team, which has been largely responsible for improving

machine efficiency in excess of 10%. Another new initiative is to utilize the newly acquired 4-color flexo folder gluer and the expertise of Poteet Printing Systems to gain access into the high graphic market. With assistance from Poteet, they have just completed their first 5-color print job. The most recent endeavor has been the addition of a sustainability team. Both Jana and Jenise are actively involved in developing the sustainability process at Harris Packaging, which focuses on waste reduction and improved energy efficiency in every area of the operation from the office to the plant floor to the trucks out on the road.



*Harrell Bivens, Vice President and General Manager, Harris Packaging Corp.*

### Plans for the Future

It’s not unusual for a retirement age owner—Joe is 65—to want to cash in his chips and play more than a little pasture pool. This, however, is not Joe’s idea of a good time. He told us that he just spent more than three million dollars on new equipment and has further expansion plans. His daughters were right – he won’t quit! But whatever Joe Harris does, his company is in good hands and his customers can be sure that the Harris name and the Harris values will be something they can count on for a long, long time.



*The Harris Family and Wendell Poteet of Poteet Printing.*