



ALL IN After her daughter's health took a devastating turn, Rakini Chinery (far left) returned to her business determined to make every day meaningful. A core group of employees, including lead designer Jim Barry, managers Jessica Bailey (center) and Donna Chamblee (lower right) and sales team member Cassie Brown (upper right) are helping her do just that.

BY MARY WESTBROOK

CLEAR EYES, FULL HEARTS, CAN'T LOSE

A family health crisis opens a hard-charging florist's eyes — and heart — to the power of her product and the strength of her staff.

Life seemed pretty good to Rakini Chinery in 2011. Allan's Flowers & More in Prescott, Arizona, the business she'd owned for more than a decade (and worked in for more than two decades), was growing — the year before, she'd purchased a second location about 10 miles from the first. Chinery worked hard — *really* hard — and took on too much, but the hand-wringing and worry of the recession was behind her. And, hey, she thought: Ever met a successful small-business owner who isn't wearing 100 different hats?

Then one day she got a call from her 30-year-old daughter Helen, a sommelier in Los Angeles. "I need to come home, Mom," Helen said. "I'm too sick to live alone."

For months, Helen had been battling a mysterious illness — fatigue, fevers, headaches, seizures and joint pain. It was too much. “Come home,” Chinery and her husband, Jim, said immediately, promising themselves and their daughter they’d figure out what to do next.

A few months later, Helen was in the neuro-intensive care unit at a hospital in Phoenix. She’d suffered a brain hemorrhage during one of Chinery’s rare days at home. The family eventually learned Helen had Systemic Lupus Erythematosus — the hemorrhage was a complication of the disease. For three weeks, Chinery and Jim passed each other in the hospital, tagging in and out as they kept watch over their daughter, who was deep in a coma. Helen began to suffer kidney failure. The only treatment was a severe chemotherapy drug. The business Chinery had worked so hard to build became an afterthought.

“All of my energy, all of my time — it was all about Helen,” Chinery said. “Nothing existed outside of that time and space.”

After Helen came out of the coma, life didn’t get easier. Helen’s health had deteriorated to the point that she needed constant care. With the help of professional caretakers and family, Chinery

threw herself into her new role, caring for her daughter, sorting through the mind-numbing maze of medical bills. She still worked, but at the shop, Chinery sometimes felt like she was walking through a fog.

“Helen’s care was all-consuming,” she said.

And then, about 18 months after the hemorrhage, something shifted in Chinery. Life didn’t get easier. Helen’s health remains tenuous and she still needs constant care, but Chinery began to look around her shop with new eyes. She saw her customers differently. Taking a routine order, she’d be struck suddenly by the powerful human emotion behind the simplest phrases: “I love you.” “I’ve missed you.” “I’m sorry.” She noticed, too, when her employees brushed aside that emotion, taking orders without acknowledging the pain or poignancy behind the request.

“My experience with Helen softened me to everything — to myself, to my business and employees,” said Chinery, adding that Jim played a tremendous support role during her ordeal.

That softening set in motion a series of major changes around Allan’s Flowers, including staff shake-ups, and new policies and procedures that have

helped re-create the business, transforming it from a shop that was profitable but uninspired to a place where employees feel valued, customers feel heard, and Chinery feels empowered to prioritize projects and delegate roles — so that she has time and space to better care for her business, herself and her daughter. The tangible changes in the shop (higher sales, increased average transactions, fewer complaints) and the intangible shifts (better morale, a more tight-knit staff) have utterly shifted and elevated the business — in a way Chinery only dreamed of a few years ago.

“I got to this place where I thought, ‘I can let this take me down, or I can rise up against the odds and be a better human being and take my business with me,’” Chinery said. “I wanted to be more generous. I wanted that idea to be the underpinning of my business.”

A CHANGE OF HEART

Before Helen’s health crisis, Chinery (like a lot of small-business owners in the floral industry) wasn’t exactly comfortable delegating tasks to staff.

“I liked to be involved in everything,” she admitted.



“Our relationship is so much more than owner-manager. [Rakini] is a large part of the reason I am the person I am today.”

- Jessica Bailey, Manager



LET’S TALK Regular meetings and sales training have helped to improve communication around Allan’s Flowers. Owner Rakini Chinery has also engaged more staff training, online and in-store.



Every interaction is based on an emotion. That's why people call us...I'm not sure I really 'got' that before.

- Rakini Chinery, Owner

And no wonder. The success of the business up to that point had rested squarely (and often solely) on Chinery's shoulders. When a problem arose, Chinery was there to fix it. When a new task needed to be learned — say, managing social media and online advertising — Chinery was the person who tackled it, even if she didn't necessarily have the expertise to do the job or the time to learn that new skill.

The result, on paper, was often lower costs. (Who needs a social media manager if the owner can tweet while unpacking roses in the design room?) In reality, it meant that some jobs around the shop were done on the fly, without much planning, as Chinery squeezed all of her obligations into her daily schedule.

Her tight control over the shop also meant that team members rarely showed initiative — why offer up an idea if the boss is going to say, as Chinery often did back then, "Just do it my way"?

During the intense 18-month period after Helen's hemorrhage, however, Chinery had no choice but to cede control to staff. She didn't have the time and energy to micromanage; she was struggling to get through each day herself.

A funny thing happened when Chinery stepped out of her fog and returned to the shop, though: She quickly realized that her team, by and large, had managed in her near-absence. People stepped up. The work got done.

"Before, I had my nose in everyone's business and all decisions had to go through me," she said. "After I got back and saw some people taking on these new roles, I wanted to be careful not to upset a system that was working."

At the same time, however, Chinery also saw problem areas more clearly. While some staff had stepped up to the challenge, others had grown complacent — a fact that became painfully obvious to Chinery as she listened to team members interacting with customers, taking orders without commenting on the milestone or life event behind the order, or working around the design room with a kind of ho-hum-is-it-5-o'clock-yet mentality.

Chinery realized she was no longer satisfied with workers who were clocking in, clocking out. She wanted people who were passionate about flowers and the business of expressing emotions. Watching her daughter struggle each day, Chinery knew she wanted her own life to matter more, and that included building a more meaningful business.

"Every interaction is based on an emotion," she said. "That's why people call us — and, to be honest, I'm not sure I really 'got' that before. Our job is to hear what customers are saying and feeling, not to simply go through the motions."

BUILDING A NEW TEAM

To get the team to where she wanted it to be, Chinery signed her staff up for customer service training (including on-site training, secret shopper calls and monthly webinars through FloralStrategies LLC) and started hosting regular staff meetings. Before, such meetings had been haphazard and infrequent.

She also started actively recruiting people who shared her viewpoint to round out and, in some cases, replace her staff.

Relying extensively on recommendations from friends and customers, Chinery hired Jessica Bailey in 2012

Allan's Flowers & More

BY THE NUMBERS

3

Full-time employees



10

part-time employees



2

Locations



\$400K

Total sales in 2008

\$1,030,000

Total sales in 2016

\$72

Average sale in 2014

\$84

Average sale in 2016



REACH OUT AND TOUCH The team at Allan's Flowers & More has increased its philanthropic efforts with events such as SAF's Petal It Forward and Teleflora's Make Someone Smile campaigns.

SPREADING THE LOVE

In recent years, Rakini Chinery has made a concerted effort to be more generous to her local community and to become more involved with local nonprofits.

"All florists are inundated with these kinds of requests, and I think before my impulse was to turn people down," Chinery said. "I decided I wanted us to be seen as a giving shop, a generous shop."

In the past few years, Chinery has increased her shop's local donations by 75 percent. A big part of that increase is tied to a simple strategy: "Find a way to say 'yes.'" To Chinery, that means working with local groups to find a solution that's a good fit for the business and the nonprofit or fundraisers — maybe a centerpiece or gift card instead of a larger or more elaborate donation.

Chinery and her team have also made a point of participating in some of the industry's most popular public relations efforts, including SAF's Petal It Forward event and Teleflora's annual Make Someone Smile Week. They gave out about 500 bouquets for each campaign last year, generating good publicity for the shop and creating goodwill around the community and within the business itself.

"Rakini has more on her plate than anyone I know — running a business, taking care of her employees and taking care of Helen," said Donna Chamblee, a manager at Allan's. "But when it comes to the community, anything that she can be part of, she is. I think that says a lot about her character."

Much of what Chinery has been working toward since her daughter Helen's diagnosis — being more generous and invested in people and her community — came together last summer when she co-hosted fundraiser for lupus research. The event drew a crowd of 125 and featured local food, craft beers and a "great local band." At the heart of the night was Chinery, talking to people, sharing her family's story. By the event's end, they had raised \$2,200 for The Lupus Foundation of America.

"It was the kind of the thing I never would have made time for before," she said. "But our situation with our family makes me want to reach out and share, to hear what's going on with other people. Helen has helped me realize how precious life is. You can't waste a single day."

-M.W.

and Jim Barry to oversee the design room in 2013. Bailey started as part-time general shop help, but she rose through the ranks to become manager by 2014 — a position that had been vacant until that point, as Chinery tried to act as both owner and manager. Barry, who had run his own floral businesses, came to Chinery after his most recent employer, another local florist, went out of business.

"I'd known Jim for about 25 years, and I knew he was really talented," Chinery said. "Jessica just proved herself to be really capable. She started out sweeping the floors, hauling garbage, and worked her way up."

During this period, Chinery also began to take a hard look at her second location — the shop she'd purchased in 2010. That location was far from profitable, and a string of bad-fit managers had wreaked havoc on the business. Employees were at odds with each other and Chinery was constantly putting out fires, while watching sales drop lower and lower. Chinery's first impulse: cut and run.

"I was ready to close it," she said.

Then, in February 2016, Donna Chamblee, a part-time employee who had been with Allan's for about five years while balancing her own family and direct sales business, made an unusual request: Would Chinery give her six months to turn that location around?

It was a wild proposition — the kind Chinery might have laughed at before Helen's health crisis. Instead, Chinery listened to Chamblee make her case and spell out her vision for the location.

"Donna believed so strongly in that shop," Chinery explained. "She saw the need for a full-service florist in that location and the talent of our designer there. She was totally invested."

Chinery offered a compromise: Chamblee could have until Mother's Day. Almost a year after that conversation, sales at the second location have doubled. Rather than being a drain on the business, it's "holding its own" and is on the way to profitability again, Chinery said. In the meantime, Chamblee has flourished in her new manager role, taking on new responsibilities related to hiring decisions, marketing and ordering and accompanying Chinery on buying trips, including one to Las Vegas.



"It's a really good team and we work well together. Rakini gives me the support I need, but she lets me get things done."
 - Jim Barry,
 Lead Designer

"Ten years ago, I was a pretty belligerent person," Chinery admitted. "I probably would have locked the door [on that second location] and walked away. I definitely wouldn't have trusted Donna. I wouldn't have been in a position to count on her in the way that I do now."

Chamblee insists that trust, along with Chinery's obvious dedication to her staff, is the "secret" to the second location's turnaround.

"I wasn't looking to work full-time as a manager," she said. "The more time I spent with Rakini and the more she invested in me, the more I was willing to step up and take more responsibility. I wouldn't do this for just anyone. I hold her in such high regard. I want to be part of what she's doing."

Indeed, Helen's ongoing health issues mean that Chinery has to have a team she can depend on every day — which means, she says, her staff also has to be able to trust her to be compassionate and understanding

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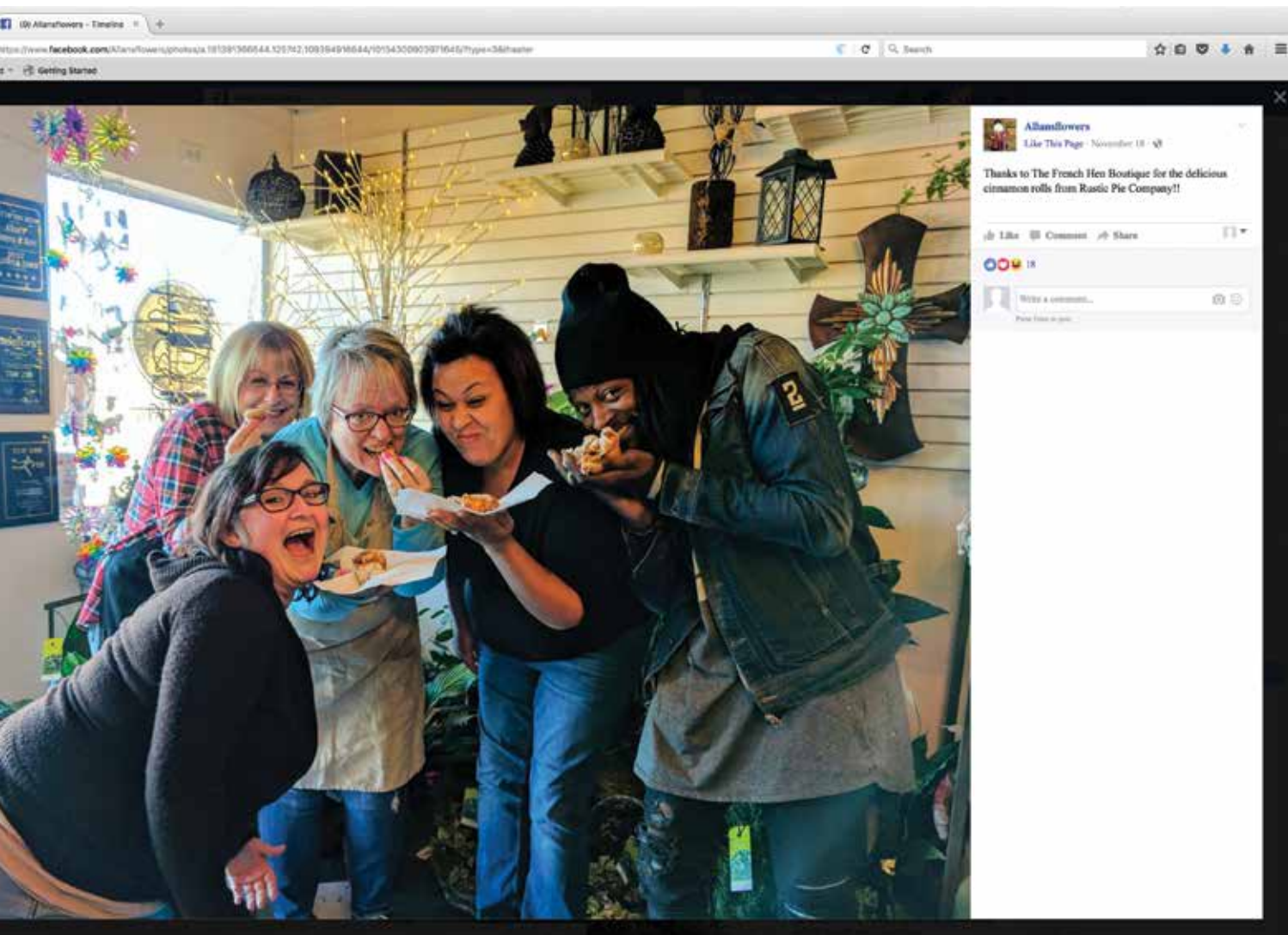
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TIME ENOUGH Rakini Chinery has outsourced her social media management and online marketing to a third party. Far from creating “canned” updates, the company has worked with Chinery to understand the business brand and create posts that capture the shop’s personality and spirit of fun.

SPECIAL EVENTS

In an effort to turn her shop into a destination and community hub, Rakini Chinery has started hosting more in-store events, including a Daddy-Daughter event on Valentine’s Day and a Mother’s Day pampering showcase.

The store’s monthly Wine and Design evening also has become increasingly popular, growing from an average attendance of eight people to about 24 for each event.

Want some guidance on hosting successful events? Go to safnow.org/moreonline.
—M.W.

(two qualities that weren’t exactly her strong suit before).

“I’ve had to make myself more vulnerable to my staff, and so I’ve opened up my life to them,” she said. “Look, this is what I’m going through. This is why I’m not here today.”

In late 2013, Bailey learned just how supportive her boss could be. Three days after Thanksgiving that year, Bailey’s then-husband broke her jaw. Chinery visited Bailey after her release from the hospital, brought her clothes and, offered support at a crucial time.

“I had to have reconstructive surgery, and at first when Rakini asked me what happened I told her, ‘I broke my jaw,’” Bailey said. “She got me to

say that *he* broke my jaw — to say it out loud.”

Bailey was terrified back then about what would happen to her and to her young children, but Chinery became one of her most reliable supporters, holding her job and helping Bailey get her first apartment (other members of Allan’s staff helped her move). Today, Bailey is out of that marriage and in a much happier, healthier place.

“I can’t even tell you where I’d be without Rakini,” Bailey said. “Our relationship is so much more than owner-manager. She is a large part of the reason I am the person I am today.”

Chinery’s more open approach with staff and customers has also had an unexpected effect on sales. Last year,



"The more [Rakini] invested in me, the more I was willing to step up and take more responsibility... I want to be part of what she's doing."
- Donna Chamblee, Manager

the business did just over \$1 million in sales for the first time, a personal goal for Chinery. (Eight years ago, the business was bringing in about \$400,000.) Profitability has improved, average transactions have increased by \$12 and there's been a dramatic reduction in the number of complaints. All proof, Chinery says, that her staff is listening more deeply to customers and creating designs that truly speak to their needs.

"People care more," she said. "We are all listening more and paying better attention — to customers, in the design room, to each other. Everyone is so invested."

SETTING NEW PRIORITIES

Chinery says that ultimately she's found her new approach — trusting and empowering, not micromanaging — freeing.

Last summer, for instance, she attended the Society of American Florists' annual convention in Maui even though the shop had 13 weddings lined up during the event. She never would have been comfortable stepping away like that before, but her team handled the packed weekend without a hitch, and

Chinery had time to learn new things and make new industry contacts.

"We had a meeting before I left to talk through the logistics, and that was it," she said. "It was brilliant — they were brilliant."

Back home at the shop, she's also started outsourcing some jobs, including the administration of her online marketing campaigns and social media efforts.

"Before, I was trying to handle all of that, but I only had time to do it [halfheartedly]," she said. "I decided, if I'm going to do all of this, I want to do it right."

To that end, she hired one company (Bloomerang Solutions) to handle her online marketing efforts, including social media posts and Google AdWords campaign. That same group also has introduced her to new ideas, including remarketing (where companies create ads that follow customers who have visited a website but have not completed a purchase).

The investment has paid off. Not only has the company freed up Chinery's time, allowing her to devote her attention to other tasks, but the expert approach helped online sales jump 70 percent during the first eight months of 2016.

Those efforts "are really helping to keep our name and brand in front of customers," said Chinery, who added that she's more than happy to let true experts handle that portion of her business. "It's put our online sales off the charts."

Chinery has devoted at least some of her newfound time and energy to reinvigorating the business's brand, so that it feels more contemporary and welcoming to customers. That includes updates to the physical space — see how she turned a \$200 used bar into a funky checkout area on p. 14 — and the business's online presence: Chinery now uses more of her own design photos and far fewer stock images to promote her work. (She uses a BloomNation site and has also retained membership in two wire services.)

"Online, we're going for a more personal and a more contemporary feel overall," she said. "And it seems to be working." 🌿

Mary Westbrook is a senior contributing editor for the Society of American Florists. mwestbrook@safnow.org



FAMILY FIRST "Our situation with our family makes me want to reach out and share, to hear what's going on with other people," said Rakini Chinery, pictured with her daughter Helen, who was in a coma for three weeks in 2011 and still requires constant at-home care. "Helen has helped me realize how precious life is. You can't waste a single day."