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FASHION: FALL ISSUE : PERSONALITY : Famed Boutique Is Soffia Wardy's Show to Run Now

September 12, 1990 | PATRICK MOTT | *Patrick Mott is a regular contributor to View. and*

NEWPORT BEACH — Soffia Wardy will smile with recognition if you mention the TV commercial about the pharmacist and his daughter.

Dad and daughter are sitting around the table at home, talking about how dad's customers have come to depend on him over the years and how the daughter, as a new pharmacist taking over the business, has big shoes to fill.

The phone rings. It's an old and exacting customer. Daughter assumes the customer wants to talk to dad. But, to her surprise, she finds the call is for her.

Commercial over, torch passed.

Yes, Soffia Wardy knows that one. As the daughter of Amen Wardy, the owner of Orange County's best-known boutique, she has known what it feels like to face customers with purses full of money who come through the door expecting to spend it at the urging of a man who has been in the fashion business for more than 30 years--not a young woman of 23 who has been in it for four.

But the Amen Wardy store in Newport Beach's Fashion Island is her show now, and has been for more than two years. Her father now spends most of his time at his newer Beverly Hills store and leaves the Newport Beach operation to vice-president and general manager Soffia.

And, she said, the transition appears to have worked, the result, she said, of longtime customers recognizing that they are still being watched over by the Wardy family.

"What's made the business so successful," she said, "is his presence in the store. There are very few businesses like ours that still have the family involved. In businesses like Nieman-Marcus that started as family businesses and are now corporations, you don't see the presence of the family in management or in the store itself."

However, she said, "when he started not being in the store, it kind of threw people because they're used to seeing him here. As I started to come in and get to know the customers they started feeling a bit more comfortable because they thought, 'OK, Amen's not around, but at least his daughter is here.' They felt like they were being well taken care of."

A few customers balked at first, she said, but "my dad always backed me 100%, no matter what decision I made. When someone would (question a decision), he would turn to me and say, 'You have your decision right here.' That helped me tremendously, but it also made the customer feel that dealing with me was just like dealing with him."

Well, not exactly. Wardy and her father have come to be not unlike another father-daughter business combine, Hugh and Christie Hefner--he the high-profile, flamboyant point man of the Playboy empire, she the analytical business brains behind the operation.

"We're very different," she said. "He's got this unbelievable amount of enthusiasm and energy. He can pump up the sales staff and the customer so much. I'm not like that at all. I'm in the administrative end a lot more, the organization of the store. He is much more into merchandising the store and getting into the dressing rooms with the customers. I deal a lot more with the customer concerns and the staff if they need guidance. That's the part that he doesn't like to do and has no patience for. So we balance each other out really well."

However, Wardy's father had no intention of giving up his role quickly or easily, she said. After attending a language school and taking some fashion design classes in Italy, Wardy returned home to a job in her father's Newport Beach store in which she was told to do little more than sit in the store's jewelry boutique and answer customer questions about the items.

"It wasn't like, 'OK, you're my daughter, come into the business,'" she said. "He wanted to see whether I liked it and was capable of doing it. It wasn't made easy for me. But I decided I wasn't just going to sit there and twiddle my thumbs."

She began reading up on fine jewelry, learning as much as she could about her then-limited job and reorganizing the filing system of that department. After six months, she slowly began to take on more duties, "doing a little bit of everything, trying to pick up as much as I could, and little by little I started easing into the management position. I learned a lot in a short time from my father, but I had to learn a lot where he didn't have the patience to say, 'This is how you do it.'"

Her father, however, said he did recognize that his daughter had an aptitude and a love for the fashion business.

"When she came back from school in Italy," he said, "she found she liked it, and she was very good. She worked out very nicely. She's terrific. I still have my finger in (at the Newport Beach store), but I couldn't have two stores without her."

Being the daughter of Amen Wardy meant, at least for Soffia, that a career in fashion was inevitable. Her mother and aunt also worked in clothing manufacturing and retail and, according to Amen, Soffia's brother Jean-Paul, who is studying business at USC, will eventually enter the family business.

"I knew," Soffia said, "that I'd inevitably end up working with him.

"It had been very much a one-man operation, though. He had a lot of trouble relinquishing authority. He's just got to be in on everything. But little by little, when he started to feel more confident with what I was able to do for him, I was able to take things off his shoulders and for the first time he relinquished that authority."

Her changes in the operation of the boutique have, for the most part, been subtle from the customer's point of view, she said. Most have been involved with internal organization and streamlining the backstage operation of the business. However, she now requires that her sales staff wear a uniform--black suits with large gold buttons--in the manner of European boutiques. And she is presiding over a remodeling job that will make the store more visually open.

Still, she said, it is Amen Wardy who continues to do all of the buying for the store, and though she has never had one of her decisions vetoed, she says that "I run everything by him first."

She puts in long weeks, often working 10 hours a day, six days a week. But, she said, her upbringing prepared her for it.

"I've always been like that," she said. "People have said, 'Why don't you have fun? I mean, you're only 23. How can you be so serious?' But that isn't an attitude I acquired just since I came into the business; it has always been a part of my personality. I've always been very serious, very responsible, very much into what I happen to be doing at the time."

She would like to be able to give her father "more time and flexibility to travel a lot more and really enjoy, because he's been in this business since he was 14."

Still, she said, "I don't think he'll ever retire. I think as long as he's alive and the business exists, he'll be a part of it. He's got that unbelievable energy."

She sees her job as a kind of legacy, and one that she intends to remain with, if not necessarily expand. There are no plans, she said, to open more boutiques or turn the Amen Wardy name into a kind of empire. She is satisfied to continue to pull the backstage strings while her father's name is on the front of the building and his personality continues to shape what goes on inside.

"I don't think there will ever be anybody to replace him," she said.