

A home-town boy makes good—and helps others to succeed.

To say that Tim Farrell gets around is to understate the case. As a sought-after industry professional, including fulfilling his duties as a Teleflora Education Specialist, Tim has traveled the globe from the U.S. to Tokyo to Nairobi (where he recently made a presentation to the World Flower Council). He has been seen arranging flowers for the Pope, the Bush Inauguration and the Academy Awards, and is a regular commentator at the Philadelphia Flower Show.

But the fact is, Tim is a local boy, still living in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania—the same town where he was born and raised. College took him to nearby Villanova University, where he picked up a part-time job in a flower shop. He “got” the business immediately. “I saw that floral designers take flowers and help one human being express emotion to another human being through those arrangements. That intrigued me,” says Tim, who started by sweeping the floors and cleaning up. “I was lucky in that the owner taught me design and allowed me to experiment,” he recalls. “I moved into the role of designer really quickly.”

So enamored of the business was Tim that he opened Farrell’s Florist in 1983, between his junior and senior years at Villanova. At that time, there were eight other

Located in an older part of Drexel Hill, where the bottom level of many buildings is retail and the upper level is apartments, Farrell’s Florist occupies an enviable corner location with lots of windows. Over the course of his career Tim has become recognized worldwide as a speaker and educator on floral design and business.



Farrell’s Florist

Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania

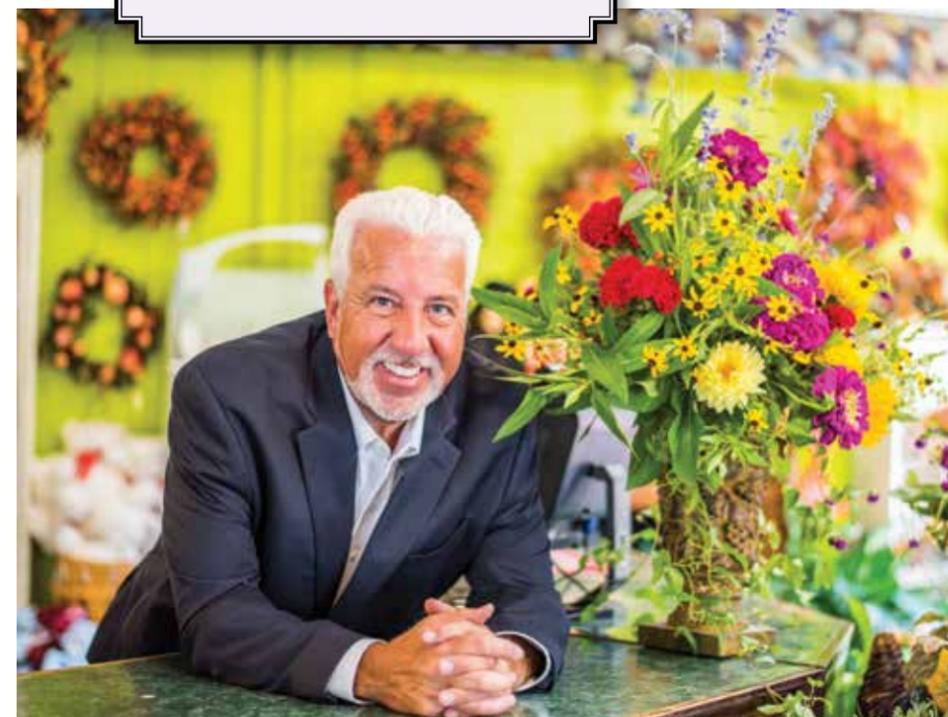
Owner: Tim Farrell AIFD, AAF, PFCI

Niche: Everyday, small-town flower shop

Number of employees:
5 full time, 5 part time

Square footage:
2,000 square feet including
the work area

www.farrellsflorist.com



florists in Drexel Hill. Today—34 years later—Farrell’s is the only one left standing.

A PROGRESSIVE SHOP When he opened his shop, Tim was already on the cutting edge of the business, which gave him an immediate advantage. “We opened as a progressive shop,” Tim explains. “Holland flowers were just starting to get a hold on the American market and we used them. We experimented with many flowers that other shops didn’t have. We also had very strong customer service and follow-through. We invested in a POS system from Teleflora, which gave us a lot of information at our fingertips. We would go the extra distance to find the right flowers and do whatever we could service-wise to make the customer happy—that was our concentration.”

Tim says the demise of the other shops didn’t happen all at once; rather they shut down gradually over the years. “The recession took a few out, but most of it was generational,” he explains. “The town’s original florists were of a more mature generation and the owners didn’t have anyone to take the business forward.”

Farrell’s delivers to most of Delaware County, just outside Philadelphia. “This is a place of many small towns, each with its own zip code,” he explains. “In a city like Phoenix you can drive for hours and still be in Phoenix. Not so here. You drive a little while and you’ve been in four towns. We do go into Philadelphia for special events, but it’s not part of our normal delivery area.”

ACCOUNTING TOOLS THAT WORK An accounting major at Villanova University when he launched the business, Tim was tempted to drop out and run the shop full-time—a move to which his parents strongly objected. Tim relented and finished his degree, which he has never regretted. His understanding of controlling cost of goods and maintaining balanced books have helped him keep the store on track through many economic ups and downs.

shop profile

An example of how Tim incorporates sound accounting practices to drive good business is the Excel-based cost analysis tool he developed for his designers. "I created it with a past employee who really understood Excel," he explains.

"The way it works is, each of our four design stations has a computer. When a designer is filling a custom order, they actually plug in numbers. First, they enter the dollar figure for the order, and the program subtracts labor costs. Then they enter the dollar figure for the container, and Excel subtracts that. Then they input the number of stems; if they use two roses it subtracts eight dollars. Two stems of mums calculate as two times three dollars. The program continually subtracts items used from a running total. If the total exceeds the order amount, they either take out flowers or re-price the order. It has proven to be a great tool to keep costs of goods sold under control. We love it."

This homegrown tool provides multiple benefits to both the business and the customer. "It makes for a very consistent design look," Tim explains. "One designer may be instinctively generous with what he puts in an arrangement, while another may be skimpy. That kind of inconsistency can set us up for failure in terms of expectations. Our method is fair; it ensures that we make the money we need to make and that the customer gets the value they paid for."

Another advantage is if, at any point in time, a customer questions the arrangement or the price, Tim can call up the file and see exactly what went into the arrangement.

TEACHING AND LEARNING As noted, Tim is a frequent speaker at industry events sponsored by everyone from Teleflora to the World Flower Council, to SAF (the Society of American Florists) and AIFD (the American Institute of Floral Designers), of which he is a past president, as well as making presentations for wholesalers to demonstrate new materials.

Tim says he learns as much as he teaches at these events and brings the new ideas back to his own business. "The initial



assignment is to teach something," he says, "but I learn something everywhere I go. I might learn a trick from another retailer, I might find a new product that's available from a wholesaler. So it keeps me up-to-date on the trends and what's going on in the industry."

Educating consumers is another passion for Tim. In his own shop, he is working to bridge the gap between the more traditional style customers see in magazines and on websites and the more architectural style that Tim favors.

"We are always looking for opportunities to introduce more architectural designs to our customers," he explains. "If we are donating flowers, we ask the organization to let us pick the style. We create more contemporary and architectural arrangements so people can see the potential of flowers." Tim stays active in his own community, which keeps the opportunities coming. "I have served on the board of directors of a local swim club, and on my parish council and a home school association when my kids were in school," he says. "We assist lots of charities by donating or helping these groups source flowers."

MASTER OF CEREMONIES Another way Tim is able to expand the floral experience of consumers is his participation in the annual Philadelphia Flower Show, the largest such consumer event in the U.S., attracting about a quarter of a million people in the course of a week. It has both landscape and floral sections and Tim has been involved in the floral design segment for many years.

Farrell's Florist customers walk into a contemporary, light-filled shop of chocolate browns and chartreuse greens. "We have an area where cut flowers are displayed in buckets" (top left, behind the assembled staff), says Tim, "and another area where we keep our plants and planters together. The front area has permanent flowers and a cooler with fresh flowers and arrangements for sale."

shop profile

His role is as Master of Ceremonies for the week-long series of design competitions called The Designers Studio.

"The designers don't see the product until they get to the table, and then they have 45 minutes to make the design, after which the audience votes on the winner. My job as host is to talk to the audience while the designers work, teaching about the donated product to give the sponsors recognition, but also to teach the audience about the elements and principles of a good design as well as the skills designers must have. The audience ends up with a better understanding and appreciation of what florists do."

Each of the Design Studio competitions draws several hundred people. In the span of a week Tim hosts approximately 40 competitions.

A SHOP DESIGNED FOR DESIGNERS About 16 years after opening his shop, Tim was presented with an opportunity to purchase the space next door. "We opened the wall between shops and used the additional square footage entirely as workspace," he says. "The showroom remained at its original size. So today, of the 2,000 square feet on the retail first floor level, 1,000 square feet is design space."

Tim took advantage of the opportunity to create optimized workstations for his designers. The result is four permanent design stations equipped with everything a designer needs. "Everything is at the designer's fingertips, so no time is lost walking around," Tim says. "We have extra space in other parts of the shop where seasonal designers can work, but these four dedicated design stations allow our staff designers to work comfortably and efficiently." Tim reports an increase in productivity of more than 20 percent in his staff designers that he attributes to the efficient layout of the workstations.

WORLD CLASS This past September Tim went to Nairobi, Kenya to give a presentation to the World Flower Council, an organization that has members from 36 different countries. The council presents a summit

in a different host country every year and invites speakers to discuss a specific aspect of floral design.

"My talk was on the subject of rhythm in floral design, which is the direction and pace at which your eye flows through a design," Tim explains. "For this presentation, I discussed that each person has an internal 'rhythm' in the beating of his or her heart. That beat is dependent on many factors that are influenced by the human experience. I then matched samplings of music to life events. The result was a presentation that closely connected flowers to emotion—something I am so passionate about!"

Tim also presented a hands-on workshop to 30 students exploring a secondary principle of design, tension. "Tension is when a design looks like a secondary force is working on it," Tim says. "An example might be when all the flowers look as if they are moving in one direction, as if blown by the wind. Or it may look like the floral materials are dripping out of a container due to the force of gravity."

Sometimes the best part of traveling and teaching design is coming home. "When I'm in the shop I love being part of the everyday task of filling orders," he says. "Of course, I still handle all the bill pay, payroll, and all the other issues of running the shop, but when I'm here I like to spend at least part of each the day at the design bench. It is here that I can experiment and create and put into practice some of the great ideas I have learned in my travels."

AN IDEA THAT STILL WORKS While most of Tim's business comes in over the phone and Internet, he has never lost sight of the traditional wire-service orders that continue to be a profitable part of his business. "I'm a very firm believer in using a network like Teleflora to ensure my success as a retailer because it can be very profitable. The florist-to-florist services are a big part of my marketing plan. I let the customer know that while I may not make the arrangement myself, I service the order to get it delivered anywhere in the country, and I'm going to take care of



the order. A lot of florists underestimate this facet of the business but it can be a very valuable part of a business plan."

ANNUAL RECKONING The competitive landscape has changed for better and worse over the years, which has required Tim to be in a constant state of adaptation. For Tim, moving the business forward is not so much a matter of introducing new ideas as it is taking a cold hard look at where the business stands each year—something he advises all florists to do.

"Every florist needs to reevaluate their business annually, considering strengths and weaknesses and then making decisions based on that," Tim says. "I think you have to constantly evaluate where you can make improvements or what points of business should no longer be a part of your plan because they just don't work anymore."

It's a matter of paying attention to the whole package. You can't be so concerned about design that you're not tending the business side. On the other hand, in a creative industry with an aesthetically categorized gift, you can't just focus on the dollar. A successful florist needs to understand and manage both sides of the business.

One piece of advice from Tim: "The number one goal you should be working towards when you're in business is customer loyalty and word-of-mouth recommendations," he says. "Building a loyal base of customers, who have had such a great experience with your company that they are willing to recommend you to others—that is the key to a successful future!" 🌿

When the retail space next door to Farrell's Florist became available, Tim was able to purchase the space and convert it to workspace with optimized workstations, each with its own phone, computer, water supply, sink, cabinets, and a ten-foot worktable. Designers can look forward into a larger cooler window to see what products are available and have everything else they need at their fingertips at all times.