





The Babers and Strunks

BABER'S INC., PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI, WWW.BABERS.COM

Blended personalities and families, laced with laughter, result in a recipe for rent-to-own success

By Kristen Card

Collectively, Shannon Strunk and his wife Cynthia Baber-Strunk have survived: the tragic death of a spouse; raising a four-child blended family; the devastation of their home and hometown by Hurricane Katrina; almost 10 years teaching high school biology; and almost 50 years of combined service in the rent-to-own industry. And they are still laughing.

Honestly, it's difficult not to chuckle along during a conversation with the couple. With the juxtaposition of Shannon's rapid-fire speech and Cynthia's deep-South drawl, and their convivial back-and-forth, it's hard not to smile—and easy to see how their partnership has succeeded and sustained.

The two came into rent-to-own only a year apart: Cynthia, a teacher by training, joined her father-in-law's company, Baber's Inc., in 1986 to help her then-husband, Barry, the firm's executive vice president. Shannon came to Baber's in 1987 in response to a newspaper ad seeking an account manager.

In 1989, an airplane accident ended Barry's life and began Cynthia's ascension within the company to co-presidency with her brother-in-law, both of them still under the guidance of Barry's father, James Baber. "Barry always said if anything happened, I needed to help run the business," Cynthia remembers. "Because I had the chance to learn from him, I was able to step in and fulfill many of his duties."

Meanwhile, Shannon was promoted to work at the Pascagoula home office and something clicked between him and Cynthia—at first, professionally, and eventually, personally. The two wed in 1993, joining her three children and his son into a Baber-Strunk half-dozen.

"We're opposites in many ways, it's amazing we work so well together," Cynthia says. "He's the great visionary; I'm the voice of reality. But even though publicly Shannon is more aggressive and I'm more subdued, when we're alone, we seem to think almost exactly alike."

Today, Baber's Inc.—bought by the pair following James Baber's death in 1999—boasts 52 stores in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Louisiana, as well as 11 Rent-n-Roll locations, two Furnish 123 stores, 16 check-advance locales, a collection agency and some developing commercial real estate.

Cynthia's eldest daughter, Lauren Baber Wood, serves as the company's comptroller, while her husband, Paul, oversees several of the Rent-n-Roll stores. Cynthia's son, Shane Baber, oversees the other Rent-n-Rolls, while his twin sister, Kristin Baber Pugh, acts as the firm's public-relations person and event planner, as well as assistant to Cynthia and Shannon. Kristin's husband, Parker Pugh, is developing the Furnish 123 concept for the family business, while Shannon's son, Christopher Strunk, recently joined Baber's as an account manager (just like Dad did almost a quarter-century ago). Additionally, Shannon's brother, Sheldon Strunk, has been the firm's vice president of purchasing for more than a decade.

At the heart of it all are Shannon and Cynthia, who have been working side-by-side for more than 20 years. "We work together in the same office," Shannon says. Then adds, half-joking, "She has to get up from her desk to throw a shoe at me, but she can do it." Yet, judging from their jovial banter, it's doubtful much footwear gets flung. "We're a working team," Shannon concludes. "We work all the time and we love it. It's our passion." ✧

Opposite page: front row: Hailey Wood, Lauren and Brayden Wood, Kaitlyn Wood, Christopher Strunk; middle row: Jenna and Addison Baber, Kristin Pugh, Cynthia Baber-Strunk and Shannon Strunk; back row: Shane Baber, Sheldon Strunk, Paul Wood and Parker Pugh