

Hughes Marino

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Rancho Santa Fe Family of Entrepreneurs ‘Pay It Forward’ in Many Ways

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By **Kathy Day**

As Jason Hughes tells the story, when he and Shay got married after graduating from Pepperdine University 23 years ago they were \$75,000 in debt.

They lived in an apartment in the University Towne Center area where rent was \$825 a month and his take-home pay was \$800. Even with Shay working they were just scraping by, said Jason.

But with a sense that her job was making her sick, she quit working. A day later she found out she was pregnant – and without health insurance.



“My parents asked what we were thinking,” Shay said, sitting across from Jason in the downtown office building that houses their company, Hughes Marino.

“We were forced into a sink-or-swim moment,” he said. “I worked really hard and fortunately had Shay at my side. I did a few things right and we’ve been rewarded for it.”

Those few things have put Hughes Marino on the map in San Diego and Orange County – they recently opened a Newport Beach office – as leaders in representing only tenant and buyers in the commercial real estate industry. Jason, who started his own business 20 years ago with former partner Craig Irving, formed the new company with La Jolla David Marino as executive vice president in January 2011. Marino and everyone but Irving moved to Hughes Marino.

Jason, who said he came from a family that had nothing and “was ultimately pushed out of every house they lived in,” put himself through school doing everything from selling houses to cooking at the Chart House, where he met Shay when they were 16. Once they were in a place financially where they could begin giving back to their community, they weren’t shy about pitching in.

Whether it was the Rancho Santa Fe Endowment, the Child Abuse Prevention Center (now the Polinsky Center) or the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the couple has been doing their part, mostly with children, Jason said. Over the years, the 14-year Rancho Santa Fe residents have contributed “millions of dollars,” often giving back some or all of their fees and then some. With their stylish new office space they are now providing the space for free for hosting events and meetings for nonprofits. They are not alone, he added, since their employees also are active in nonprofits throughout the region.

One of the most challenging projects Jason took on was when he asked to take the reins of the New Children’s Museum board when the organization was facing a 30-day deadline before its downtown site would revert to the Center City Development Corp. Told that CCDC would extend the timeline for an additional 30 days if Jason took the presidency, he kicked his real estate expertise into high gear.

He headed a campaign that within three months had raised \$15 million in cash and obtained a \$10 million construction loan from Torrey Pines Bank – where he was a founder and past board member. He also put the Hughes Marino construction management team to work overseeing the project – at no cost to the museum – and within two years the museum paid back the construction loan.

“I did what I had to do,” he said.

Shay, who for years had been a stay-at-home mom for their three children, is now the chief operating officer for the company or, as Jason puts it, a “stay-at work” mom who manages a larger family.

She can also still keep an eye on their children, since their two oldest, Star, 22, and Tucker, 19, – who both graduated from the University of San Diego at age 19 – work for the company. Bailey, now 17, has been acting since he was 7 and has his sights set on becoming a writer.

“Bailey has always been a storyteller,” Shay said.

Shay’s company bio notes that she was “unknowingly recruited” into the business by Jason who got her to direct the firm’s television commercials. Then she tackled the website and started helping with marketing, business strategies and internal operations.

But when they bought the 12,000-square-foot building at the corner of Front and Beech streets she was all in.

As Jason led a brief tour of the building, he talked about what went into gutting and restructuring it with its wrap-around mezzanine housing individual offices for their staff, which soon will number 29. But mostly he praised his wife’s talent and ability to transform not just the space but the office culture.

She came up with the original design that is centered on the “living room,” complete with a baby grand piano and big-screen TV that shows family photos of not just the Hughes clan but also of their employees and their families.

From the start, the living room was designed to be a place where their team would be comfortable as well as a spot they could open up to the community, she said. “It’s a gift to our team members and organization and our clients.”

To one side of the living room is a full kitchen, complete with one Subzero refrigerator with individual lunch boxes for each employee and another that is stocked each Monday with goodies like waffles, oatmeal and juices. To the rear is a putting green, which gets regular use, and a billiards table.

“At 5 o’clock every day, someone is playing,” Shay said. And recently a new player captured the trophy from the monthly tournament.

Down the hall are spa-like bathrooms, complete with a shower, and a fully equipped gym that has enabled employees to drop their gym memberships.

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Of course, there are large and small conference rooms, too, equipped with the latest technology to facilitate client discussions and planning.

Shay selected most of the materials, furnishings, lighting and art and kept close watch as their home-away-from-home took shape.

“I’m so grateful, but mostly I’m grateful for Shay wanting to be involved,” Jason said. “She has changed the company.”

That change put the emphasis on family, in part because of the way the employees interact in the new space, but also on the focus of having their families be part of the culture. A wall leading up the back stairs is a family portrait wall; spouses are invited to quarterly meetings where a speaker focuses on making their lives better. Next month the entire staff and their spouses or significant others will gather at The Pelican Hill Resort in Newport Beach.

The culture also emphasizes the happiness of the individual and strives to be more than just about business, Shay said. “The happier we are as individuals the better we do at everything in our lives.”

To that Jason added: “Happy people know one way to stay happy is to make others happy. It’s self-fulfilling.”

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