

family FOCUS

Garland Cole and Leigh Ashley have learned a powerful lesson of love and joy. They aim to share that joy with their clients in a field that can often be confusing and overwhelming.

Garland Cole and Leigh Ashley, Ashley Cole Benefits

What started as a simple exercise in business succession planning turned into a paradigm shift that dramatically changed the lives of a mother-daughter team.

Story by Nancy Miller Barton
Photo by Korey Howell Photography

SOMETIMES THE SLENDER BLONDE CALLS THE woman sitting beside her on the overstuffed couch by her given name, 'Garland.' Other times it's 'Mom.' Whether she says it consciously or otherwise, that subtle little difference speaks to the situation these two women find themselves in. They are, yes, mother and daughter, but also co-owners of a successful business, Ashley Cole Benefits, an independent insurance and benefits group.

Garland Cole and her daughter Leigh Ashley are like many mothers and daughters. They, at times, finish each other's sentences, laugh at some memories, and nod knowingly at more painful ones. Yet it is a funny, offhand remark made by 38-year-old Ashley that helps you realize that, even though mother and daughter are in business together, they are certainly not connected at the hip. They are individual women, each unique and dynamic. So what was Ashley's offhand remark? "Always decorate your own office." And the conversation went on from there. "They are reflective of our personalities," Ashley says. "Her world travels and my family photos." Here, Cole chimes in: "Your organization." She looks fondly at her daughter, then explains, "Her office is always nice and neat and clean. Mine always has piles all over." Ashley, a mother herself raising two boys, a middle and high schooler, has an office filled with photos of her sons. Yet she eagerly describes Cole's office – a spear from Indonesia, letters written to her dad from Presidents Roosevelt and Coolidge and a silver platter from China. At Ashley Cole Benefits there are both subtle and obvious signs of family wherever you turn, from the decoration to the business operations.

"I'd say we had tough teenage years," says Cole. "Growing up was tough for both of us, because both of us were growing up!" she laughs, eyes sparkling. The parent/child relationship is no doubt

complex. The interesting part is growing to love that complexity.

"There were too many 'ouches,'" says Ashley. Who doesn't nod knowingly when remembering how some family member can push your buttons? Cole, for many years, was a hard-working, single mom, raising Leigh and her younger brother Scott. She eventually opened her own benefits company, even sold jewelry on the side to make ends meet. "Most mothers and daughters have wounds from the growing-up years," says Cole, "and we were no exception." But she admits that may not have been the stuff of the "ouches." For one thing, "I used to be really sarcastic," she says candidly. "I always thought of myself as being funny, but what I was, was sarcastic. I'd make people laugh, but it was cutting." That can hurt. Ashley continues the story, "Instead of being 38 (years old) or whatever and hearing that, it feels like you're eight...I can't work with someone as an 8-year-old...I have to be able to be with her...and not be her little girl." Ashley acknowledges the first year working together, four years ago, was rocky. She says she'd hear her mother on the phone advising a divorcing family on insurance, and it would push buttons. She was willing to try it, however, because something in Cole had changed.

Cole sits by, nodding, understanding. She knew enough to give Ashley room, because something else intervened. "It was the God thing," she says, which brought her calm and understanding. Cole explains that before she and Ashley began to work together, she became a Christian; following in her daughter's footsteps. It became, "easier to figure out what is Leigh's issue and what is my issue...I didn't have to be the fixer any more." You might say Cole had a very significant paradigm shift. "I really thought about her as a partner and not as a daughter." Cole allowed Ashley the gift of time. If they were not Christian,

they say, they would not have gone into business together. "Too many ouches without hope," says Ashley. "The hope of each of us being a new creation, an imperfect creation, but a liberated creation."

Cole and Ashley both realize that's a lot to take in. Many don't view a relationship with God the way they do, and yet the lessons they've learned, and the accompanying message of hope, are powerful ones. The paradigm shift changed their relationship, allowing them to work together in a business which is dedicated to helping others. "What we've learned is more diplomacy," says Ashley. "What we've learned is gentleness...we've both learned to be careful with our words, to be gentle, to be humble."

So the next task is accomplishing "gentleness" in an industry that some view with distrust – insurance. Ashley Cole Benefits works to find insurance benefits for businesses, individuals and families. Both speak of their clients in an almost familial way. "If you take care of your clients, your clients take care of you," Cole explains. Their business ethic is one of integrity – in fact, they've coined the phrase, "insurance with integrity." It's a simple phrase, yet delivered with a depth of sincerity that speaks volumes.

Away from the office, Leigh Ashley spends much of her time as many young mothers do, raising her two sons. Cole has already walked that path, so now she nurtures by volunteering her time ministering to women in prison. She offers the inmates an ear and talk of a relationship with God. "I love listening to the stories of the women in jail and how they got there...I think the missing link is hope...they have no hope." ★

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