

Laine Photolabs focusing on closing after 43 years

By Kathryn Reed



After being in the business of chronicling the lives of those on the South Shore since the 1960s, Laine Photolabs is about to close shop.

“It provided me, for 20 years, the lifestyle I needed. I needed complete control of my time,” Brooke Laine said. It meant being able to raise her kids without interference from a boss and serve the community as a member of the South Lake Tahoe City Council.

But it was also a business she inherited from her parents and not one she would have necessarily picked.

“Running a business I’m quite good at. Photography was never my cup of tea,” Laine said.

The 1982 South Tahoe High grad returned to town in 1990 to take over the business.

For the last three years she has been working at Bank of the West. This is something she will continue to do. What else the future holds for the 46-year-old remains to be seen.

The contract with Lake Tahoe Unified School District ends this school year. Laine will shoot America’s Most Beautiful Bike Ride in June.

She said the decision to close was not difficult.

"I've been looking forward to it," Laine said. "I'm totally excited about moving on."

She said it's not a coincidence the contract with LTUSD expires the same year her youngest son graduates from high school.

The retail end was shuttered in 2007. The agreement between she and her parents was the family name would not be sold, thus the reason for closing the business and not selling it.

The early years

Ed and Del Laine arrived here through different routes. He in 1957 with his first wife. After divorcing he stayed at the lake. Del started coming here as a toddler each summer with her family. She still spends her summers at the cabin off South Upper Truckee Road.

They met through a children's theater project Del was spearheading. Ed volunteered to do carpentry work on the set. They got engaged, married and raised three daughters and a son here.

For a spell Ed was advertising director at the *Tahoe Daily Tribune*. Del wrote columns for the paper about skiing, hiking, bowling, fishing, gossip and other activities. In 1967 the couple left the *Tribune* to open Laine Associates.

"We did primarily advertising. Photography was a component of that. It evolved and Ed became more interested in photography," said Del, who turns 80 Saturday. "The difficulty was the seasonality."

In the early days the Laines made their money in seven months and ran up the bills the other five. Del often worked at home doing the books as she tended to their offspring. Ed supplemented their income by teaching photography for nine years at Lake Tahoe Community College.

“In the beginning I think it was rough. For some reason or another we made it. We were able to grow into wedding work and portrait work,” Ed, 78, said. “We put a studio together. The wedding business was our main stay.

“I never liked a lot of my work. I was never satisfied with it,” Ed said. “Maybe I was wrong in being overly judgmental. A lot of artists are like that.”

Changing direction

The one-hour photo business became a reality when they moved from South Lake to Round Hill in 1989. They incorporated and created Laine Photolabs Inc.

“Our lawyer made (Photolabs) one word, which was a mistake,” Brooke said.

They sold film, camera bags and batteries – but never cameras. In the late 1990s they began transitioning into digital photography.

The wedding business began to change as digital cameras cropped up. Everyone began to think they could take a picture as well as a professional and the business became diluted with wannabe professionals.

Brooke was more than ready to stop taking wedding photos. Cranky people and having to dress for the occasion are some of the reasons she was glad to move out of that genre.

“We decided we would transition from wedding to sports photography. That was my decision,” Brooke said. “I was a mother with kids. I wanted to be where they were. They were in sports.”

Her computer background made the digital work an easy leap. They bought a processing machine in 2000. Though the upfront costs were expensive, it didn't take long to see a savings.

For a time father and daughter ran the business as equal partners. Then Ed worked a few days a week before calling it quits for good.

Brooke's children have worked at the lab during the summer, but neither has a desire to carry on the family business.

"Brooke was the mainstay. She did one tremendous job in terms of public relations and fairness," Ed said. "She is such a fair person. The business was respected from that standpoint."

A collection of photos

It's not just memories of vacations that came through the lab. Law enforcement had Laine Photolabs develop pictures.

Nothing was put in the trash. It was either destroyed or given back to the agency. This way no one could dig through garbage cans for evidence.

Confidentiality was a huge part of the business. Most of the crime work was done at night so a customer couldn't walk in.

Brooke said she would try to inspect the photo for quality and ignore the image as best she could.

Easier photographs to deal with are from schools. Brooke approached LTUSD in 2003 about doing school shots. She bid on the project, got a one-year contract that turned into a multi-year contract.

Community events, lawsuits, weddings, the development of Tahoe Keys – it's all part of Laine Photolabs' history.

"We have a huge legacy of photographs which chronicle that era," Del said of the city's early years.

The family isn't sure where the photos will go, but possibly one day to the local historical society.