



Lake City's Brad Wheeler (right) and his son B.J.Wheeler lean against their Cessna 177 airplane.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Brad and B.J. Wheeler both embrace leadership roles in their community

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

A leader is someone who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way. For Brad Wheeler and his son Bradley “B.J.” Wheeler, this is not just an expression, but a way of life. These two members of the Wheeler family share more than just their name; they both have a desire to lead and make a positive impact on their community.

Together, they are showing the way to the people of Lake City.

Brad and B.J. Wheeler have both taken on serious leadership roles in Columbia County. Brad, 51, will lead the Lake City-Columbia County Chamber of Commerce as president of the board in 2017, and B.J., 17, is the student body president at Columbia High School for the current school year.

“I feel B.J. is following in my footsteps,” Brad said. “I’m proud of all my children. Of course I’m proud of them, especially B.J.”

Giving to the Community that Gave to Them

The Wheeler family’s desire to lead stemmed from the community rallying around them when they needed it most. When Brad’s father, Bill Wheeler, who will be 80 this February, was attending Georgia Tech back in the 1950s, he came home to Lake City for a break and was in a hunting accident where he sustained a

gunshot wound.

According to Brad, the doctors told his father’s parents that he would not make it through the night, and upon hearing the news, the people of the community lined up at Lake Shore Hospital to donate blood because he was loosing it as fast as it was going in. It was with their help that Bill survived, Brad said.

“My dad had always told me that the community supported him and he always wanted to give back to the community for what they did for him,” Brad said. “I’ve always kept that in my mind because my dad was involved in a lot of things too.”

Brad, like his father, is also involved in a lot of community activities. In addition to serving his fourth stint on the chamber board this year, Brad has also served on the Florida Gateway College Foundation Gifts Board, the Christian Service Center’s Board and the Kiwanis Board.

Soon, Brad and Bill Wheeler, who served as chamber president in 1973, will become one of two father-son duos to serve as chamber president in the history of the organization.

“I was a community leader for quite some time,” Bill said. “I’m real, real proud that they’re following right behind me.”

This father-son trend is being upheld by B.J., who is also actively involved in several organizations at



Brad has his pilot's license and B.J. is currently working on obtaining his.

Columbia High School. He has held officer positions with the school's Student Government Association for the past four years. He is also a member of the National Honor Society and the treasurer of Bleacher Creatures, the school's athletic pep club.

B.J. says his dad has inspired him to not just be involved in the community, but to be involved in any way that he can. Even as he is actively involved with the students at CHS, he is also actively involved with the administration and helping the district as a whole. B.J. serves as a student ambassador on the CHS School Advisory Council and the Columbia County School District Strategic Plan Steering Committee.

"With whatever you do you help out and you do as much as you can," B.J. said.

Building a Business

Brad's experience with building his own business will serve him well as he takes over as the chamber president upon his induction at the Chamber Ball on January 28.

Brad graduated from Columbia High School in 1983,

and upon graduation started working in the funeral business at Biggs Funeral Home. Then in 1993, he went to mortuary college in Atlanta, and after earning his degree he came back home to Lake City to work at Biggs Funeral Home.

After working at Biggs for several years, Brad opened his own funeral home, Gateway-Memorial Funeral Home, in 2002. In 2004, he merged with Forest Lawn Funeral Home and his business became Gateway-Forest Lawn Funeral Home.

Although he semi-retired in 2008, Brad still goes in and works about 25-30 funerals a year, whenever a family requests him.

The funeral business has not just been a way of to make a living for Brad. It allows him to serve the community as he helps families through some of the hardest moments they'll ever face.

"The funeral business has been like a ministry to me over the years, we're just in a specialized part of it," Brad said. "You know, dealing with death and dying to help people get through it."

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B.J. Wheeler (left) stands with his dad Brad Wheeler at the Lake City Gateway Airport. This father-son duo continues to make a positive impact on their community, with Brad to serve as Lake City Columbia County Chamber of Commerce President for 2017 and B.J. serving as Student Body President at Columbia High School this school year.

With his years of experience building his own business from the ground up, Brad's knowledge of the industry and the area will help him successfully lead Columbia County as the chamber president.

"The chamber helps businesses thrive and prosper and you try to help in any way," Brad said. "We're trying to help support and make better our businesses that are a member. I've been on the chamber board a few times and it's something I love."

A Word of Advice

According to Brad, being in charge doesn't necessarily mean doing what you think is best, but rather doing what's best for the people you're leading.

"You always have to listen to people, to what they're saying, and have an open ear," Brad said. "You have to help people make the decisions that might not be best for them or yourself but for the betterment of the community."

Another piece of advice Brad has for anyone who wants to become a leader in their community is to make sure you don't overlook the small details.

"I learned that in my funeral business," Brad said. "You have to pay attention to the small details because those are the ones that'll get you. You have to pay attention to the small details because those are the most important."

B.J. has already put his father's advice to good use, applying it to the situations he finds himself in while leading the students at Columbia High School. According to him, while you may have to make these tough decisions that some people may not agree with, the end result is worth the battle.

"It's definitely worth it," B.J. said. "It's a lot of work. You have to look at what's better for everyone. So you may go through a lot of stuff where you may have to make a decision that people may get mad about or people may say it's not cool but you have to look at the overall picture. You have to deal with a lot of stuff, but in the end it's worth it. It's worth what you do."

When B.J. finds himself in difficult situations while fulfilling his leadership duties, he knows he can turn to his dad for advice.

"Especially if I have a special circumstance where I don't know what to do, like if I need help with a specific person, dad is always there to help," B.J. said. "I can always ask him anything."



Leaders Who Soar

Brad and B.J. also share another common interest besides being leaders in their community. The father and son frequently find themselves taking to the sky. Brad and B.J. both love to fly, and together they take turns piloting their Cessna 177.

When Brad semi-retired, he had always been interested in flying. So, he bought a small plane and earned his pilot's license. After taking a few rides with his dad, B.J. decided to earn his license too, and he is currently working on getting the hours in the air he needs to become a certified pilot.

"It's like father like son," Brad said.

B.J. plans on turning his love for flying into a career.

"Whenever dad started flying I thought, 'well that's pretty cool,'" B.J. said. "Then I went up in the plane a couple times and that's when I really got interested in the Coast Guard."

B.J. plans on attending college upon his graduation this year and earning an engineering degree. Afterwards, he hopes to

join the United States Coast Guard as a helicopter pilot.

Another family activity that Brad and B.J. participate in is their annual Christmas display. Together along with his dad, Bill, his wife, Dr. Lorrie Wheeler, and his children, Holly, Haley, B.J. and Hanna, Brad sets up a jaw-dropping display that lights up the whole neighborhood.

"One thing we do, which is a family affair, is our Christmas display," Brad said. "It takes us all a month to get it all up."

You may have driven through the Wheeler's Christmas display, located down the road between Sonny's BBQ and McDonald's on US Highway 90. You can ride through the family's driveway and see hundreds of holiday lights. The main reason they continue this Christmas tradition every year is because it spreads joy to everyone who sees it.

"It's a lot of work but we enjoy it and people enjoy it," Brad said. "The joy of that is seeing the people enjoy it. I feel like that's a big community thing. We do it for the community."