

Relationships Built on Generations of Trust

Suburban Opticians has been an institution in Tacoma, Washington, since 1971. What began as a single shop has evolved into a second-generation independent optical practice that prides itself on skilled care, longstanding vendor and customer relationships and a commitment to doing things differently.

"My father, **Lloyd Neil**, opened his first optical company in 1971," says **Melissa Rodriguez**, owner of Suburban Opticians.

"He just wanted to be an independent businessman. He started his career working in an optical lab and decided to become an entrepreneur. In the early days, he was making most of his income making safety glasses and taking on whatever work allowed him to stay independent."



Melissa Rodriguez

The business grew quickly. In 1973, Rodriguez's older sister, **Pam Neil Rhodes**, joined their father in the business, bringing "the fashion and design components while our father handled the opticianry," Rodriguez says. For a time in the 1980s, the business grew into five independent

notes that Suburban still employs two licensed opticians, besides herself, with about 45 years of experience each, and many patients are multigenerational.

"We have patients who say, 'Your dad fit me with my first glasses when I was 12,'" she says. "Now they bring their kids and family. People come to us for the level of knowledge, patience and care we take with each prescription."

Suburban Opticians sources its lenses through independent ABB Labs, a business partnership Rodriguez describes as "incredible. ABB came to me about 15 years ago," she says. About 80% of the lenses Suburban brings in come through from ABB Labs. Suburban Opticians also holds onto technical capabilities that fewer shops offer today. "We still edge lenses in our store," she says. "If a customer has a favorite frame or only one, we can order uncut lenses from ABB. A few days later, opticians can put the lenses in while the patient waits. That's a legacy I'd like to continue."

Business partnership rooted in service

In addition to the broad product portfolio, ABB brings a business model rooted in patient service. ABB Manager, Lab Sales **Nick Folkers** and her Optical Sales Consultant provide Rodriguez with

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stores across the region. But rapid expansion came with trade-offs. "We ended up downsizing because it became challenging to provide the level of quality my father wanted," says Rodriguez, who bought the business from her sister in 2019.

Since 1995, Suburban Opticians has operated from a single location—a decision that anchored the practice in the community and put consistent service above scale. That consistency shows in the shop's clientele and staff. Rodriguez

Business Reviews that help her strategize what's next for an independent optical. They understand her space in the market. "Our demographic is a bit older," she says. "It will be a challenge over the next five to ten years to bring in a younger, sustainable clientele that doesn't rely solely on managed care."

Her ABB business partners understand she doesn't want to compete with big-box stores, online sellers and chains. "I need to bring in more exclusive prod-



Suburban Opticians was started by Melissa Rodriguez's father, Lloyd Neil, here with her mother, Barbara Neil.

ucts and combine them with exceptional customer service to create something patients want to pay for," she says. She added Anagram to her business model, allowing her to provide her customers with real-time, out-of-network processing. That shift has improved her cash flow and made the business more efficient.

Her commitment to quality has been tested and proven. Customers who went to less expensive sellers came back to her, saying they learned their lesson. "Frames didn't last, and the warranties or customer service didn't match."

Whether with customers or with her business partners, those relationships built on reputation matter. "This industry has changed a lot in 27 years," she says. "Board management, private equity and changing vendor behavior have shifted how people do business. I choose to partner with labs and frame vendors where relationships are still alive. I want to feel and touch frames, for example. I don't want to do that on an iPad. The relationship portion of the business is equal in importance to product."

As Suburban Opticians navigates demographics, competition and changing vendor landscapes, Rodriguez is determined to preserve the shop's core: expert, patient-centered care delivered with the craftsmanship her father started decades ago. "We try to maintain the same level of customer service he wanted to bring to the community. That legacy—skill, care and community trust—is what we're building on." PA