



Business's family tradition 60 years strong

By ERIC RUTH, The News Journal
Posted Friday, April 13, 2007

MARSHALLTON -- No one likes to think about their furnace. Or their toilet. Or any of the other pipes, gadgets and gizmos that help keep us humans in civilized comfort.

Brian Frederick, on the other hand, thinks about them all the time. So does his brother Robbie. And his dad, Bob, along with his grandfather, his uncles, and now, even his 22-year-old daughter Alexis.

The ever-evolving (and frequently quirky) realm of plumbing, heating and air conditioning systems has been driving this whole family for 60 years, and probably for some time to come, over at Joseph Frederick & Sons. From humble origins in 1947 on the front porch of the firm's patriarch, Joseph, the firm has been a familiar presence over the years in many New Castle County homes.

Born in Elsmere, it hasn't wandered far, standing on Old Capitol Trail for a time before moving to its current two-acre location on Stanton Road. Today's company is leaner, and a little less prominent in the lucrative commercial market, but the standards set just after World War II and upheld through the years have survived, employees there say.

"There's an element of pride that's there," said longtime employee and operations manager John Ratcliffe.

"It's always the Frederick way," said sheet metal mechanic Tom Platt. "It doesn't matter if it's Joseph, [his sons] Bob or Ken, or Brian and Robbie."

Today, the company serves about 12,000 customers a year, and brings in about \$5 million in revenue. One key to success has been avoiding the autocratic mindset and inconsistent intergenerational abilities that can plague family-owned businesses.

"It's very easy to get comfortable in this business" and fail to uphold the standards of hard work, Robbie Frederick said, especially after the original entrepreneur steps down.

"A lot of people are in this business because it was given to them, whether they wanted it or not," he added.

The family was also fortunate to have so many members of different generations involved, helping to avoid painful transitions or long learning curves. "We were forced into jobs whether we wanted it or not," Frederick said. "And it allowed us to learn the business from every angle, from beginning to end."

An important shift for the business in the 1980s also helped it return to its roots and focus on its strengths. The firm once had 115 employees and worked on 1,000 new homes a year, but dealing with homebuilders has become an aggravating and financially risky pursuit.

"We had most of our eggs in one basket, with one builder," Frederick said, and walking away from that side of the business was a tough call. "It was a shock, and a blessing."

Today, the firm has been pared to 38 employees. It wasn't easy to reconnect with the residential customers that had been the core of the business, especially at a time when labor costs were intimidating to the average homeowner. Flat-rate pricing provided the solution, raising the risk that some jobs wouldn't earn a profit, but would broaden the potential market.

The company is in a position to grow, but "we're not going to expand just to grow the numbers," Brian Frederick said. And the days of being squeezed by profit-hungry developers are probably over.

"We watched in pain what happened to our father, who is a very giving man, a very honest man," Brian said. "We watched him taken advantage of."

Still, many challenges remain, challenges that are a product of the times, such as high workers' compensation insurance bills,

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government regulations and soaring raw material costs. Today's young people see little allure in a job that brings its share of dirt, sweat and unfavorable conditions, despite decent wages.

There's also a mindset that plumbing and HVAC trades don't require a high degree of training or intelligence.

Today, as systems become more sophisticated, it's impossible to do without either, the Fredericks say.

As a result, a good worker is more of a crucial commodity than ever.

"I think the customers are more savvy than they've ever been," Brian Frederick said.

"No matter how glamorous we try to make our 60-year-old business, people only call when they need you," Robbie Frederick added.

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