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From New York to Florida, we all need our stone

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

A business that started 47 years ago in Rockland County north of New York is now a key player in the business life of Fellsmere.

Francesco Fornabaio founded his stone installation business in 1960. By 1976, his then eight-year-old son, Nick, was already working with his dad.

Today, Nick, 39, owns the business, Antiquo Stone, which has expanded into stone manufacturing and installation. His 72-year-old father works for Nick as the company's primary installer foreman.

Antiquo makes a wide variety of stone architectural elements for residential and commercial construction companies. Included are floor pavers, fireplaces, window surrounds, fountains and decorative items, more than 500 different components in all. The products are designed for higher-end homes, but also fit the mid-price-ranged residences as well.

While the firm supplies a large number of stock items, it also produces custom pieces at the direction of architects and contractors. Once an order is placed, molds are made and the product is cast from aggregate and silica sand mixed in an automated batch plant machine. The product is then removed from the mold and cured for up to 30 days before delivery to the job site.

Nick's employees learned the process either from Fornabaio or from veteran employees that he trained. All Antiquo installation crews are in-house employees, and are often on the road in Florida for anywhere from three days to three months, depending on the size of the project.

The company serves both the wholesale and retail markets and welcomes distributors, as well. Fornabaio estimates that retail makes up 15 percent of his company's revenues with 85 percent in the commercial-residential market.

The Fornabaio family, including Nick's mother and father and his wife, Michele, moved to Florida in 1997 to escape the New York cold. They followed Nick's in-laws to the Sunshine State.

The family fell in love with Sebastian as a place to live, but chose Fellsmere for the stone business because the capacity for future expansion was better.

In New York, the Fornabaios learned the stone manufacturing process through their affiliation with several shops that supplied the products for them to install. Nick started in Florida with just one employee, who joined him in making molds, casting products and answering the phone. He quickly added another worker to handle the ever-increasing phone answering duties. The entire operation was housed in a 2,000-square-foot building on a half-acre.

As the business grew, much of the manufacturing moved outdoors to spots under canopies, temporary structures and the blue skies. In 2004, Antiquo opened a manufacturing facility, a 16,000-square-foot building not far from a 5,000-square-foot office structure. The main building can be doubled in size when the time is right. Antiquo's buildings now sit on 5.5 acres.

Fornabaio says the company has been profitable since the first day. The first customers came from advertising, and then positive word of mouth took hold.

"It took seven years to be known as a major player in this area," Fornabaio said.

The company grew to what Fornabaio describes as a comfortable level in 2005 with revenues peaking in 2005-2006.

Like virtually every business linked to the residential construction industry, Antiquo Stone has ridden a financial roller coaster. The company had 35 employees just last year, but that number has now dropped to 14.

"In addition to employee downsizing, we cut operating costs in areas like advertising, telephones and supplies, and we closed our Vero Beach retail showroom," Nick said. "We are keeping equipment that is paid for and holding off on new capital investments. We have less volume now, but the same profitability."

He feels a recovery is still several years away, but he's optimistic. Antiquo Stone has the Treasure Coast mostly to itself, with the nearest competitors in West Palm Beach and Orlando.

With no business background, Nick says he learned management by trial and error. Today, he handles estimating, cost control, advertising and other back-office duties. A dedicated family man, he no longer puts in the round-the-clock hours required in the company's early days, but instead aims for a three- or four-day workweek.

In addition to casters, installers, bookkeepers and secretaries, Nick has had the help of operations manager-estimator and general top assistant James McArdle for the past five years. McArdle toured the business and fell in love with it even though he knew nothing about stone. He's learned and now runs many of the day-to-day operations.

"I liked the atmosphere and the philosophy of putting money back into the business," McArdle said. "It's a joy to come to work here."

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