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Abby BeMent

08/28/2013 14:59:00

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Rawi Tabbah enjoys the research and development side of the business.

HOUSTON – President Rawi Tabbah established International Stoneworks Inc. in Houston in 1982.

“In the beginning, we were mostly in the equipment business related to the stone industry,” Tabbah said. “Within five years, we became a natural stone restoration and maintenance business.”

Describe your very first job?

My very first job was painting houses. During college, I was a dishwasher at the cafeteria on campus. I worked as a dishwasher as a part of my scholarship.

Where did you go to college?

I attended the University of Oklahoma and earned a Master’s degree in Finance. I got my undergraduate degree in Finance at Bethany College in West Virginia.

What sparked your interest to get into the stone restoration business?

I have a background in finance. I worked for Texas Commerce Bank before I got into the stone business. In the early ‘80s I wanted to start a business myself.

My parents had an import and export business in France. One of the items they were dealing with was equipment and products related to the stone industry. I soon became interested in the stone industry too.

What were the early days like at the company?

I began my business by introducing one product to maintain natural stone without wax.

After I was given the opportunity to restore one marble bathroom floor with this new technique in a major Houston hotel, I expanded the business by performing stone restoration, maintenance work and selling various stone care products.

Today we sell our products nationally and internationally. While typically we perform stone and tile restoration in residences and major buildings in Texas, we have traveled as far as California, Florida and New Jersey.

We have grown over the years to develop various non-wax restoration systems for both natural stone and tile, including a high speed grinding system.

How long has your daughter worked with you at the company?

My daughter, Jacqueline, joined International Stoneworks in Oct. 2009. She handles the sales and marketing. She does all the social media and advertising for us. She stays very busy.

I am very glad my daughter works with me today. It is nice because it gives me a sense of continuity.

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If one day I have to retire, Jacqueline has a choice, she can continue here or she can do what ever she wants to do.

Does the company have any annual events?

Yes, we have an annual Christmas party at the office. All the employees and their families are invited to attend. It is a big celebration, even in lean years.

We never stop having the Christmas party together. Everyone cooks and brings in a dish to share.

To celebrate our 30th anniversary in 2012, we hosted a party at The Tasting Room at Uptown Park.

It was an occasion to celebrate the company and our loyal commercial and residential customers.

What are your favorite hobbies these days?

My favorite hobbies these days are listening to music and traveling with my wife.

Whenever we get a little time off, my wife and I like to discover and explore places that we have never been to before.

We have traveled to the Middle East and spent time in Alexandria, Egypt, which is where I was born.

We went to see the Pyramids, saw the ancient buildings in Turkey and visited a place called Petra in Jordan. We saw some very nice stone!

It was extremely impressive to see all the stones in their natural environment.

Where was the most interesting place you traveled to see natural stone?

Not too long ago my wife traveled to Carrara, Italy. It is a famous town with a white marble quarry.

Visiting the quarry was almost a spiritual experience for me. My wife and I went inside the mountain to see how the workers quarried the huge blocks of marble.

We were at the quarry for about five to six hours. It was very interesting, especially for someone in the stone business.

I think it is something that everyone in the stone business needs to do at least once.

I would say it was the most memorable trips related directly to my business.

Do you and your wife have a trip planned this year?

Yes, my wife and I are going to travel to Washington and Oregon in September.

Do you like to attend sporting events in Houston?

My wife and I bought tickets to see the Houston Rockets play in the fall season. We are excited Dwight Howard has joined the team.

How do you stay up-to-date in your industry?

I attend events such as Surfaces and StonExpo/Marmomacc Americas Education program.

Last year I co-presented a lecture on stone restoration and maintenance. I also moderated The Essentials of Stone Maintenance Forum and participated as a panelist in the Stone Restoration Forum.

I enjoy covering the technical aspects of natural stone restoration and maintenance.

I will do another presentation this year at the StonExpo. There will be a geologist and an installer on the panel with me. We will talk about the different types of stone, the installation of stone and ways to restore and maintain the stone.

What has been the most rewarding part of your job?

One of the things I enjoy most is research and development. There are so many different kinds of natural stones in the world.

I enjoy learning about how to refinish and maintain the stones. That is the interesting part of what I do.

What does it take to stay in business for more than 30 years?

I think to stay in business for more than 30 years, it take flexibility and to realize when you have a door that is closed in front of you, you have two choices – you can break down the door or find a window. We try to find the window!

You have to adapt. If you don't adjust and adapt to your market and to your circumstances in life, you will never make it. Always be looking at opportunities that come to you.

What advice would you give a young person who wants to do what you do today?

I would say try to find a mentor. I found an older gentleman to teach me the business when I started.

He was kind enough to take me under his wing. He was a person who had been in the stone

business for three generations.

He really helped me and guided me. He allowed me to go on jobsites with his crews.

This business is difficult and you can't learn about it in school. You learn by practice. You have to be curious and flexible. You have to learn to work with your hands. You have to run the machines.

It is not just a behind the desk job. You have to be in the field as well to learn.

What are your future plans?

I am always looking for ways for our business to improve and grow.

I love teaching my daughter, Jacqueline, about the services provided by our company.

I have full confidence Jacqueline will mold the business to what she wants to do with it.

Right now we are very lucky that we are busy.

There is a lot of new commercial and residential construction going on right now in the Houston area. Whenever construction booms, it is good for us as well. It is going to be a good year for us. I look forward to celebrating another 30 years! –ab

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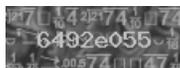
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