

Keeping it in the Family

In 1910, an immigrant Hungarian metalworker came to Macon from Houston, Texas with only a few things in this world: his wife and two-year-old daughter, a motorcycle, and a steadfast business philosophy. His name was Louis Ervin Schwartz, and the very small business he began almost a century ago now is one of the largest and most respected commercial and industrial roofing and sheet metal contractors in the country. Indeed, for several years running, RSI and ENR Magazine industry surveys have consistently ranked LE Schwartz & Son among the largest companies in their field.

This hometown company with a big-time reputation specializes in custom sheet metal manufacturing and installation, commercial and industrial roofing maintenance, historical roof restoration and precision manufacturing. In 1994, the Krugers launched the subsidiary, Schwartz Precision, which focuses on the production of precision parts for the commercial, industrial, aerospace and transportation industries. Melvin Kruger, grandson of the company's founder, has been with LE Schwartz since 1952 and currently serves as Chief Executive Officer. As President, son Steve oversees much of the operations of the 200 employees.

A family-owned and operated business, LE Schwartz & Son ushered in its fifth generation in 2004 when Michael Kruger joined his father Steve and grandfather Melvin in the offices he has wandered through since he was a boy. He is the inimitable bridge between the past and the future, what was and what is to be. Seated with these three men, you can see that Michael has great respect for each of his elders and their business strategies, yet it is clear he is developing his own style. Michael comments about his future with an easy smile. "There's so much to learn and I'm trying to take it all in, but I'm not worried that things won't be okay because I care too much about

this company and this family not to keep things where they need to be. I see the growth happening and we'll go where the times take us. I'll keep the trend running," he says.

The "trend" thus far has been for direct descendants of LE Schwartz to employ within the organization once their education is complete. Melvin, Steve, and Michael all followed the same pattern before and after graduation from The University of Georgia. Melvin explains the conventional wisdom for earning the respect of other employees' respect. "Each family member has to prove himself to other employees of the company," Melvin says. In other words, as each

family member enters the company, he usually begins in roofing, learning each area and works his way through the ranks. Training normally starts as a summer job in high school and continues through college.

Exactly, what is the secret to LE Schwartz & Son's longevity? Steve, a longtime business leader in Macon, shares some of what has worked during his tenure: "Caring about all aspects [of the company], whether it be the customers that are your life's blood, your employees that allow you to serve the customers, or your heritage that allowed you to get here. We care about our community, which has provided us with a lot of things over the

years, so I guess I would say that is the most important thing," Steve explains.

It is evident how much loyalty the Kruger family has for Macon by their civic involvement. Steve and Melvin have both served as president of their synagogue, Sha'Arei Israel, at which the entire Kruger bunch are active members. Steve now serves as Chairman of MEDC. It is humorously reported that Melvin has been a member of and/or chaired just about every organization in Macon, but you will never hear that from him, as he is extremely humble regarding his community responsibilities.

Steve, who joined his father at LE Schwartz in 1978, offers valuable

advice to up and coming family companies. "Every family person needs to go where they fit. They need to complement one another," he says. Melvin adds: "Communication is critical. If family members don't like the business, they should talk through that and realize that it might not always work out."

Moreover, a company and its leaders have to know how to roll with the times, so to speak. "One of the major challenges you go through generationally, whether it's a family business or not, is the business environment changes. Michael brings computer skills, which were limited in my time, and weren't there at all when Dad was

coming through the business so that has kind of evolved in a general business sense. We all have to adapt in order to move forward in a positive manner," Steve remarks.

Positive evolution is a perfect coin phrase for LE Schwartz & Son's almost continuous expansion since 1910. What began as a humble enterprise at the dawn of the 20th century saw a growth spurt during World War II. Then, the company stumbled into prosperity again in 1953 after a devastating tornado ripped through Warner Robins, creating a tremendous amount of roofing and sheet metal work during subsequent rebuilding. Business has been expanding ever since.

Melvin, Michael and Steve Kruger represent three generations of LE Schwartz & Son.

Melvin visits with Schwartz Precision technicians, Robert and Stacey.

Recently, the LE Schwartz & Son subsidiary, Schwartz Precision Manufacturing, received their aerospace Quality Assurance certification.

As LE Schwartz & Son navigates through the first decade of the 21st century, its employees are proud to boast a company responsible for some of the most visible roofing and sheet metal projects in the Southeast. Among their many accolades, RSI Magazine named LE Schwartz & Son "National Roofing Contractor of the Year" in 1987; in 1994, the company was named "Georgia Family Business of the Year" by Kennesaw State College and the Atlanta Business Chronicle. The National Roofing Contractor's Association also has presented the company with the Gold Circle Award for workmanship. Most recently, the LE Schwartz & Son subsidiary, Schwartz Precision Manufacturing, received their aerospace Quality Assurance certification.

Regarding their quest for excellence, Melvin comments, "We're not a company that has a philosophy of being the biggest. We want to be the best. I think we've got the people to make us grow and prosper."

As Michael prepares to move to the helm of his family's dynasty someday, what counsel does each of his relatives wish to pass on to him? "It takes all aspects...you need to work within all parameters that allow other people to come with you as opposed to you pulling them," his father says. Grandfather Melvin wisely notes, "If there's anything we really understand, it's that we rise or fall based on each other. We deal with people with integrity. I'm not worried about Michael's values system. As long as he stays on the same path, I have every confidence that he'll be successful. I can't ask for anymore than that."

When asked what LE Schwartz might think of the business that bears his name, Melvin reflects for a moment. "I don't imagine in his wildest thoughts that my grandfather would've envisioned what he started would be what it is today. Life was a big struggle when he was coming along and he never got to participate in and see the growth that has occurred over the years. But we've never deviated from the philosophy that he had as a person, both as an individual and in a business sense."

Steve adds, "I like to think my grandfather is looking down and smiling."

Kristen Soles

Photography by Ken Krakow

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Melvin Kruger

Above: Bob Schorr and Tom Brewer consult with Micheal as he continues to learn the business from his family and co-workers.
Below: Steve (and all the family) acknowledge that their corporate success is due in great part to committed staff members like Karen Cross.