

ROCHESTER BUSINESS JOURNAL

VOLUME 18, NUMBER 22

DAILY EDITION: <http://www.rbjdaily.com>

SEPTEMBER 6, 2002

An engineer who redesigned his business

Gary Passero's firm is thriving today, but only because he changed his approach to work and life

By DEBBIE WALTZER

Caller using the names directory when dialing Passero Associates P.C. should be prepared to wade through a lot of Passeros.

First, there is Gary Passero, founder, CEO and president of the 30-year-old planning, engineering and architectural services firm.

Then Kenneth Passero's name pops up. He is Gary's first cousin and executive vice president of the company.

Next up is the voice of Mark Passero, Gary's eldest son, an engineer by trade and vice president of the firm.

The fourth Passero to introduce himself on the automated telephone system is Daniel, one of Kenneth's sons, a construction inspector and company vice president.

And finally, rounding out the choices for the caller is David Passero, another of Kenneth's sons, who serves as controller and vice president of the Liberty Pole Way-based business.

That is a lot of relatives working under one corporate roof. And Gary Passero—a civil engineer who heads a \$6 million company that has grown by nearly 15 percent for each of the past several years; husband of Frances, his wife of 38 years; proud father of three sons and doting grandfather of two boys and a girl; community leader; and a spiritual activist—would not have it any other way.

But while life today is good—filled with business success, loving family relationships and an active devotion to his faith—Passero's world nearly crumbled in 1987. It was through sheer determination that he turned things around.

Roots of a career

In the early years of the 20th century, seven boys lived across the street from seven girls on Rochester's northeast side. Friendships and love grew, and three marriages emerged from those modest homes, including one between Dominic and Ann, who were "smitten since high school," says Gary Passero, second of the couple's four children. Other siblings were first-born son Richard, also a civil engineer, who died of cancer in 1999; and younger sisters Gloria and Gail.

When he was 10 years old, Passero moved with his family to East Irondequoit. He attended a Catholic elementary school and Benjamin Franklin High School for two years. Then he transferred to Eastridge Senior High School, and was a member of its first graduating class in 1961.

Summers and school afternoons following homework time were not filled with idle hours for young Passero, whose father was a mail carrier. With a shovel in hand, Passero worked digging holes alongside his uncles, who owned a construction business.

He has never forgotten one job in particular.

The crew was building a city elementary school. Grubby and sweaty from their physical labor, Passero looked up to see a gentleman approaching the site, attired in a dark business suit and matching tie. Everyone stared at this person who carried himself with dignity and panache.

The young lad gaped in awe. "Who is that?" he asked one of his fellow crewmembers.

"That's the project's civil engineer," came the reply.

Passero made a career decision on the spot.

Armed with boxes of rigatoni and penne pasta, Passero said good-bye to his family and headed to Ames, Iowa. Through research, he had learned that Iowa State University's civil engineering program was one of the best in the country—and would set



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

Passero: "Every job or project is a gift."

him back only \$200 a year in tuition fees.

He quit after one year, not because he couldn't hack the university's rigorous technical curriculum, but because he had a major case of homesickness. In fact, he lost 15 pounds in the first trimester alone.

"I was an Italian kid who grew up on delicious, filling Italian bread," he recalls. "There was no fresh Italian bread to be had in Ames, Iowa—and the closest pasta was 45 minutes away in a supermarket in Des Moines."

So Passero returned home but did not forget his dream of becoming a civil engineer. He had one eye on that goal and an even more interested eye on his high school sweetheart, Frances.

The two married, loaded the car with myriad shapes of pasta, and headed west

again for rural Ames. Thanks to Frances' support and good cooking, Passero no longer had a growling stomach and was able to plunge into his studies. He earned his bachelor of science degree in civil engineering in 1966.

In his blood

Following graduation, the couple moved back to their hometown, and Passero got a job with Costich Engineering, a three-person firm.

Six months later, owner Charles Costich became a partner with Sear-Brown Group and took Passero with him. Passero stayed for 3 years, but something gnawed at his gut. It was his desire to emulate his uncles, entrepreneurs who ran their own shows.

"It was always in my blood to be on my own," he says. "And it was easy because I had nothing to lose and Franny had complete confidence in me."

So, he set up shop in a tiny one-room office at 145 Lake Ave. Through no fault of his own, Passero's first project never saw the light of day. A client hired him to perform civil engineering work on a property adjacent to East River Road, where he planned to build an apartment complex.

Passero completed his work, the landlord prepared to commence construction—and the rain began to fall.

The year was 1972. Hurricane Agnes flooded the banks of the Genesee River, and the proposed construction site was decimated.

Fortunately, things looked up from there. Over the next decade, Passero won bids to work on residential projects. Hired by suburban subdivision developers, he performed numerous civil engineering tasks, such as site design and permitting, design

of sewage and drainage systems, traffic engineering and construction inspection.

The business grew. As the company landed municipal and private development contracts, employment swelled to nearly 100 people. Passero, his cousin Kenneth says, was working 18-hour days, constantly networking and lining up new business.

Then, in 1987, Republican Lucien Morin lost the Monroe County executive's race to Democrat Thomas Frey, and the bottom nearly fell out for Passero Associates.

While the company did some work for private companies, the bulk of its projects were for countywide, municipal entities; with the change in administration, that work dried up.

Things quickly unraveled. With such a significant loss of business, the firm was forced to downsize from 100 to 40 staffers. Passero consulted with bankruptcy attorneys on several occasions because "we weren't bringing in enough work to support the debt."

And life on the home front suffered, too. Passero recalls how he had ignored his wife and three sons for many years while building the business. It hit home one day while attending a wrestling match for his middle son, during which he learned that his oldest son had been a wrestler, too. Passero had been too busy focusing on his career—and, he says, his ego—to know this basic fact about his firstborn.

He decided to make a two-pronged change. First, he immersed himself in faith and prayer. Second, he called in a consultant to help him and the firm's management team to rebuild the business. The strategy worked.

"Today, I am closer than ever with my wife and best friend, Franny, and our three sons, Mark, Christopher and Gary," he says. "Workwise, we owe no debt, we are financially strong and every one of us watches the pennies. Every job or project is a gift."

Community spirit

The firm, now with roughly 70 employees and a second office in Fernandina Beach, Fla., provides architectural, civil and environmental engineering services as well as airport planning and engineering, landscape architecture, and construction administration services for airports, universities, residential developments, retail operations, municipal buildings and others.

And Passero's cadre of fans is large.

"Gary is a very caring person," says Paul Graham-Raad, president of the Open Door Mission Inc. He works closely with Passero, who serves as secretary for the organization.

"If there is a job to be done, Gary is the one who will come forward immediately and offer to take care of it."

During the organization's recent zoning struggles with the city of Rochester, Passero located a lawyer who specializes in zoning issues to help resolve the two parties' conflicts, Graham-Raad says.

In addition, Passero donated design plans to upgrade Samaritan House, one of the organization's two overnight shelters for the homeless. He regularly leads worship services for Open Door Mission clients, prepares and serves meals, and even hired a few of the clients to help with construction on his 2-year-old home in Webster.

"He is the guy who gets things done," Graham-Raad says.

Passero also is a member of the building committee for Flower City Habitat for Humanity, a board member of the Italian-American Community Center, president of the Businessmen's Fellowship and past president of the Lakeshore Kiwanis Club.

David Schantz, Irondequoit town supervisor, agrees with Graham-Raad's as-

Continued on next page

Close-up

Gary Passero

Title: CEO and president, Passero Associates P.C.

Age: 60

Education: Bachelor's degree in civil engineering, Iowa State University, 1966

Residence: Webster

Family: Wife, Frances, Sons Mark, 33; Christopher, 32; Gary, 30; three daughters-in-law and three grandchildren

Hobbies: Volunteering in the community, playing basketball, running, working on his house, studying the Bible

Quote: "We are not rocket scientists. We have one thing to offer, and that is service."

Continued from previous page

essment of Passero.

"Gary and his staff serve as town engineers for us, and I have always found him to be honorable and a man of his word who delivers what he promises," Schantz says. "He is always conscientious and follows through, something that is at times left wanting in today's society."

The firm attends to the town's roads, sewers and sidewalks, and "keeps us safe from potential litigation and liability," Schantz explains.

About Passero's personality, Schantz notes: "He is calm and operates with self-control, but he is also genuinely excited

about what he does for a living. He approaches challenges with hope and is the embodiment of a 'type A' personality balanced with faith.

"Moreover, he is a broad thinker who you can count on to give you the straight scoop. I value our working relationship and friendship."

But don't try to get Gary to tell a joke, warns Kenneth Passero, his first cousin, business partner and confidante. While full of humor and laughter, Gary has no forte in telling jokes, and he often calls on his cousin to finish the punch line.

The pair, along with their sons and other male relatives, visit their rustic family hunting lodge north of Poland in Herkimer

County as often as they can. The multi-generational clan laugh, study the Bible together, and discuss business and ethics.

"We work hard and we play hard," Kenneth Passero says. "I am fortunate to be related to Gary, and it is a pleasure to work with him."

So concurs Mariann Giglia, receptionist for Passero Associates, who has been with the firm for 12 years.

"Gary has tremendous integrity and dedication to the staff," she says. "Working here is like working for family."

A few years ago, Giglia had some serious health concerns, and Passero was one of the first people to call her at home to see how she was feeling. Flowers arrived soon thereafter,

something that Giglia will never forget.

"It's been a blessing for me to work for Gary and this firm," she says. "I couldn't ask for more."

Recently, Passero, his wife and a few other family members traveled to Italy, where he was awestruck by the quality of craftsmanship that he saw at every turn.

"In Europe, they make things to last," he says.

When it comes to preserving the love for his family and the well-being of his staff, and helping to secure a better future for many who are indigent in the community, Passero exhibits the same mind-set.

Debbie Waltzer is a Rochester-based free-lance writer.

Reprinted with permission of the Rochester Business Journal.