



ARTISAN TILE AND MARBLE COMPANY OF NEW JERSEY

BY ROBIN FRIEDMAN

ARTISAN TILE AND MARBLE COMPANY of New Jersey stands out not only for its old-fashioned commitment to service but for its homage to another casualty of modern life: the family. John J. Sekora, the 58-year-old chief executive officer of the Somerset firm, says that one of the three best business decisions he ever made was to close the company doors at 4:30 PM each day. Colleagues called him crazy, predicting he'd never survive in an industry known for its lengthy workday. "I did it so everyone could go home to their family," says

Sekora. "I had no idea what a far-reaching impact it would have."

His decision set in motion a ripple effect that has elevated family life at Artisan. Not only do employees have more time to spend at home, they also have time to devote to their communities. Today Artisan boasts a workforce that's immersed in Little League baseball, volunteer fire departments, libraries, schools, and churches. And business hasn't suffered either. Artisan has won this year's New Jersey Family Business of the Year Award for companies with annual revenues up to \$10 million.

Sekora's second wise decision was to

The Artisan family (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): John Sekora, Nancy Czarkowski, Matthew Sekora, Carol Singer, Michelle Sekora, James Sickoria, Kenneth Sekora, and Doris Sekora.

bring his children on board. "I started as a cleaning lady," says daughter Nancy Czarkowski, 33, today the company's expeditor and corporate secretary. "No matter how small my job was, my father made it sound like it was the most important position in the world. He'd say, 'If customers see a dirty floor, Nancy, they aren't going to come in. You've got to scrub it clean. That's the most important job here.'"

Like her siblings, Czarkowski began working at Artisan in summer during high school, then joined full-time after graduating from college. "It's wonderful to work with your family," says oldest daughter

John Sekora considers each employee part of the Artisan family. "They just don't have the same last name," he says.

Carol Singer, 34, the company's financial controller. "You have a bond when you're growing up together, but then you all leave home and grow apart. We still have that bond."

Of the fifteen employees in the office, seven are family members—four of Sekora's five children, his wife, Doris Bader Sekora, 44, who handles accounts payable, and cousin James M. Sickoria, the company president. Sons Kenneth, 32, executive vice president, and Matthew, 29, estimator and corporate treasurer, round out the family tree. Artisan also employs about 100 union tile- and marble-setters and helpers. John Sekora is quick to point

out that he considers each Artisan employee part of his family. "They just don't have the same last name," he says.

Founded in 1964, Artisan, the largest commercial tile contractor in New Jersey, has installed 30 million square feet of tile and marble in 8,000 projects at hospitals, schools, shopping malls, and houses of worship. The company brings in \$10 million in annual revenues and has won more Golden Trowel Masonry Awards—the industry's Oscars—than any other tile contractor in the state.

Artisan's philosophy is summarized in its personnel manual: "Our product is not just tile or stone—it is service—and the customer is our lifeblood." The company's emphasis on returning calls promptly, being punctual, and supplying superior craftsmanship and customer service have earned Artisan an enviable position in the industry. "We're the best, the nicest, and the fastest," says John Sekora. "And another thing the competition doesn't have is five fabulous children."

This second-generation company also has vision. Earlier this year Sekora took the unusual step of establishing the Artisan Administration Committee—he considers it his third wise decision—a de facto board of trustees consisting of his children and a cousin who work for Artisan. They meet once a week to review company policy. "That was really smart of my dad," says Nancy Czarkowski. "He wanted us, the second generation, to hash out problems and concerns now, not pick up the pieces after he's gone."

Though he admits he has business smarts, Sekora credits his success with luck. Born and raised in Baltimore, he came from a poor family. His father, a machinist, couldn't afford to send his son to college. "I knew I didn't want to be a machinist," says Sekora, "but I knew I'd end up in a similar job."

Talent on the football field held the promise of an athletic scholarship, but a knee injury put an end to that dream. Teachers who liked his enthusiasm advised Sekora to accept a \$50-a-week position at Ba-Mor Tile in Baltimore and attend college part-time. He did, and quickly worked his way up, eventually taking a job with the country's largest tile company, Peter Bratti Associates in New York City, and moving to New Jersey. The commute, though, wore him down, so he took a job as office manager at Artisan Tile in 1966. In the early 1970s he formed a partnership with Arnold Hess, Artisan's founder, and co-owner Albert Vermeire. Hess retired several years later, and Sekora bought out Vermeire about ten years ago.

A self-made millionaire, Sekora shares Artisan's wealth with organizations like the National Alliance for Excellence, which awards scholarships across the United States based on academic merit. The company also has underwritten musical events at Carnegie Hall and donated labor and materials to the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and area food banks. "We've been very blessed in our own lives," says Nancy Czarkowski. "There are so many in the world, especially children, who have not."

Sekora's six grandchildren, aged one to thirteen, could one day become the third generation of leaders at Artisan Tile and Marble. "My father has given us a solid foundation," Czarkowski says. "We've watched this company blossom into something we can see our own children getting involved in."

Robin Friedman is the author of How I Survived My Summer Vacation and Lived to Write the Story.