

Local company celebrates 60 years of making right connections

Craft-Bilt is profitable at Souderton location

By Patrick Cobbs
Staff writer

Andy Stone finally has an office with a big window and a nice view. In the mornings at the Craft-Bilt factory in Souderton he watches deer grazing in the green expanse that surrounds the sprawling yellow and blue-colored building like a moat.

"I spent the first 18 years with no windows so I was going to take advantage of this," the now comfortable owner explained.

In the 60 years since its founding, Craft-Bilt has seen plenty of changes. It has relocated from its original home in North Philadelphia, transformed its product line and sales strategy and tripled its work force. Yet in many ways it has remained the same company with the same commitment to community, products and employees.

There was an anniversary celebration of sorts at Craft-Bilt last month. Trainees from the job training organization, Philadelphia Developmental Disabilities Corporation VF, provided lunch for the employees at the company as they do each year in the spring.

Stuart Boyer, PDDC's operations director, gave Stone a warm welcome when he came out to the work floor to join his sister Debbie Stone, marketing manager at Craft-Bilt, and the other employees for their complimentary meal. The tradition has developed over a 20-year relationship of support, which has its emotional center in a Christmas gift exchange where employees from Craft-Bilt even provide a Santa Claus — one of the workers in suit and beard.

"Our program has over 300 participants and just about everybody benefits from the gift exchange," said Boyer. "Craft-Bilt has been the mainstay of our fundraising for these years and the luncheon is just a way to acknowledge that."

Founded in the city in 1946 by Donald "Bud" Stone, Craft-Bilt made its name through those colorful aluminum awnings that adorn the street-side windows of so many row homes in north and south Philadelphia, and it also manufactured commercial blinds.

Debbie Stone remembers the excitement of going to the factory with her siblings to help her father on weekends. "If he had to work on a Saturday and he wanted to give my mom a break, he had three kids, he would bring us... he would always find us some job... so we all did grow up in the business," she said.

One of those jobs was sorting the little plastic caps that hang at the end of blind cords by their various colors into bins. And a big thrill was always playing in the offices and using the company's three telephones to call one another.

After Bud Stone became ill and eventually passed away, the company went to his son in the mid 1980s. Andy had already been working for the company so he was familiar with things, but the shift away from blinds and aluminum awnings had begun long before.

Following the national settlement trends that created suburbs, the company started manufacturing pre-fabricated building panels in 1962 for sale to homeowners who wanted to quickly expand their homes. A few years later they started manufacturing replacement windows, too, and fabric awnings came after that.

As the new product lines began to emerge, so did new sales strategies. Soon it became clear that quality control and customer satisfaction would be more easily controlled if the rooms that the manufactured panels were being used to build could come as a finished product rather than a collection of pieces. At the same time customers were moving to the suburbs.

"The blinds and the [aluminum] awnings were in the urban areas. You have to remember this was [after] the '50s and as the suburbs were created and grew the patios and awnings started going out there," Stone said.

And with the miracle of TV infomercials, so would the sales and installation teams, all the way out to the Rocky Mountains.

Today the company's biggest item is the Better Living Patio Room, which it sells almost exclusively through TV ads using specially trained installation teams that hold exclusive licenses to install the rooms in their sales area. A group from Tennessee was at the factory during the luncheon, building scaled-down mock-ups of the rooms as part of an intensive four-week training program.