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FAMILY VALUES

A 40-YEAR-OLD PORTLAND BUSINESS LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

BY KATHERINE GAUDET | PHOTOGRAPHY SARAH BEARD BUCKLEY

Six members of the Capozza family, from three generations, are gathered around a conference table above Capozza Tile's Warren Avenue showroom in Portland. The three men around the table are all named Joe. The senior Joe Capozza founded the company in 1974; his son Joe, who has been at its helm since 1986, and his grandson Joe runs the commercial division (and recently welcomed a fourth-generation Joseph Capozza). Jeanne Capozza, married to the middle Joe, manages the company's accounting, and their daughters Katie and Tia, along with the third Joe, comprise the company's rising generation. For forty years the family and the business have grown from deep roots in Portland's community.

"The Capozza family, they're unique. Very unique," says longtime company member Theresa Rosmus, who co-manages Old Port Specialty Tile, the company's downtown branch, with Katie Capozza. "They are very passionate about what they do, and they are working very hard in making sure that as the third generation come in, they are conscientious about what their predecessors have done." The story of Capozza Tile, which has weathered four decades of changes in Portland, in Maine, and in the building trades, with a growing business and family bonds intact, is one of hard work, smart choices, and unwavering dedication to a place and its people.

The Capozza family has made Portland its home since the 1890s. The eldest Joe Capozza was born to an Italian-American mother and a father who immigrated from Italy. He served in the Army in Alaska during the Korean Conflict, then returned to Maine to join his brother-in-law at the Maine Tile Company. "I was pretty good at whatever had to be done," he says. After about 20 years he had advanced to "running jobs" and took an opportunity

to strike out on his own. "I had a bunch of kids under my roof, and a house payment," he recalls. "I went out on my own, put my nose to the grindstone. I had a family to feed and clothe. I had to do it."

In its early years, Capozza Tile was a classic mom-and-pop operation, run out of the basement of the Capozzas' house in North Deering. The business depended on a family station wagon, a borrowed adding machine, and a typewriter; Mrs. Capozza would serve coffee and Italian cookies to the tile installers who arrived in the morning to discuss the day's work. The small operation also meant unpredictable income and grinding work. "What I used to do, I'd go to bed around 8 or 9 o'clock and get up around midnight to do my blueprint work. That's the quietest part of the day, when all the kids are sleeping," Joe remembers. When the sun rose, he would go to work. He didn't expect his son to follow him into the business. "I felt that he should do something more than tile. I told him to get a job doing something else, which he did. The time came when I told him, if you want to come with me, you can come with me. The door is always open. And it worked! He stayed."

Joe "Junior" (who isn't actually a Junior), along with his wife, Jeanne, helped transition the business into a larger company. Jeanne recounts joining the company almost by accident, when her mother-in-law wanted to babysit the children and suggested she spend a few days at work. "I was thrown to the wolves!" she says. "Jeanne, Friday you're going to pay bills. I am?" She survived the wolves, learned to use the computer, and now presides over the company's finances and human resources. "Joe and Jeanne have made the company what it is today," says Theresa Rosmus, describing the expansion that came with the purchase of Old Port Specialty Tile. Since then the business has



PROFILE | CAPOZZA TILE



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seen ups and downs, and all of the family members work hard, but they no longer face the grinding precarity of a new business. “We’re a lot more organized now,” says the middle Joe. “We’re not wearing a lot of hats like we used to have to.”

“My grandfather took it from a basement and garage to a building and a warehouse, my dad brought in carpet and vinyl, my mom brought in the accounting and finance. They’ve always taken a proactive approach from where they were in the business,” says the younger Joe. Now, as the company enters its third generation and third stage of growth, it is ready to refine its business model. “We’re working on putting systems in place for continual improvement of our technology, education of employees, and for seeking out new products. We’re sending people to classes and workshops to not only improve in flooring, but as managers and leaders. Everyone has become more aware of the importance of working together, to grow as one company.”

“This is the real transition now,” says Rosmus. “Joe and Jeanne never expected the kids to come into the company. They’ve all taken a position just like anyone off the street. They’ve all come in to learn it, not to manage it.” All of the younger Capozzas express great respect for the family heritage represented by the company and its employees. “For the three of us,” says Joe, “there are people in place who have been here for a long time. We’re learning from

those people and using their ideas to further the company.” “All of the employees that have been here for decades, they’ve seen us grow up right in front of them,” says Tia. “I think it’s a big thing that they like working with us and they trust us, because they’ve known us since we were little kids.” In order to “grow the right way,” as Joe put it, they recently convened a meeting to codify the company’s till-then unspoken core values: Excellence, Quality, Integrity, Knowledge, and Compassion.

It is important to all the Capozzas that the growing business remain a family business at its heart. The ethos extends beyond blood relationship, says Tia. “A lot of the employees get asked, ‘Are you a Capozza?’ They treat the company like their name is on the door.” Relationships with contractors and clients, too, are personal and longstanding. “I feel like you should be grateful for everybody that comes in the door,” says Katie. “More projects than not are with people I’ve already worked with, or people whose friends told them to come in. It never feels like I’m nervous to meet a new person; it’s, how have you guys been?”

“We’ve got a family bond that’s not breakable,” says the senior Joe. “And that’s a big part of making the business successful.”

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