



A mechanical mind

President Mark Gionta spearheads innovation, replication at Rochester Colonial

When his classmates at Aquinas Institute were heading off to football practice or some other after-school activity, Mark Gionta was on his way to work in one of the shops at Rochester Colonial.

"The rest of us were doing our various activities and he was already in business; it was in his blood," said Tony Monaco, his good friend from high school and a fellow member of the Aquinas class of 1979.

When his friends or family members were reading a book or enjoying the arts, Gionta was learning about the latest technological innovation from one of the many magazines to which he subscribed. He was intrigued by anything to do with the construction trades, not what Alice Walker or Tom Wolfe had written.

"When I was younger, I'd rather read Popular Science or Popular Mechanics as opposed to reading a novel," Gionta said. "I couldn't get through a novel, but I could get through Popular Science or Popular Mechanics or Popular Electronics cover-to-cover because I just had to know about it."

Which is why, when Gionta was in high school and college, he never looked to the future and saw himself in an office setting, behind a desk, analyzing data on a computer.

Sure, as the oldest son of Sam Gionta, owner of Rochester Colonial Mfg. Corp., there was a strong likelihood that he would someday move into a senior management role at the company.

But in reality, he preferred being in the field. He liked the jobsite. He liked installing custom windows and doors. And what he really liked was when customers were satisfied with the finished product.

"Nothing beats the end of a job when a customer comes up to you and says, 'Wow, this really looks nice,'" he said.

Four decades later, as the president of Rochester Colonial, that reaction from customers is what he still strives for, even if he's not the one hearing it directly.

"He hasn't changed at all," said Monaco, the company CEO. "He's humble, he's hard working and he always lets other take credit for his accomplishments."

Rochester Colonial has national reach
A family-run business since 1960, Roches-

ter Colonial manufactures and installs custom windows and doors for both commercial and residential clients. The company has worked out of its 100,000-square-foot facility on Lyell Avenue since 1967, and along the way has become one of the premier providers in the industry.

From the George Eastman Museum and Geva Theatre, to Yale University and the Hard Rock Café on Pier 39 in San Francisco, Rochester Colonial has done work near and far.

The success has been based on a fairly simple premise, one passed down through the family and preached today by Mark and his younger brother, Paul, the company's vice president.

"My father and my uncle (Vince) taught us, people are only going to buy from people they like," Gionta said. "They're not going to buy from high-pressure salespeople. They're not always going to buy on the best price, they're not always going to buy on the highest price. They're only going to buy from people they like, so you treat them like family. You treat them like you want to be treated."

The goal isn't to close the sale today, it's to ensure that when the sale is made, the same customer comes back again and sends his friends to the Rochester Colonial showroom on Lyell Avenue or on Jefferson Road in Henrietta.

"This isn't a one-shot deal, this is a long-term relationship with our customers," said Gionta, who has been company president since 2011.

That's how the business has thrived since Sam Gionta bought what was Laquig Colonial in 1960. The firm really hasn't strayed too far from what it always has done, either, sticking to the window and door sector of the industry.

Oh, the product offerings have changed. In 1984, Rochester Colonial was the first in the region to manufacture vinyl replacement windows on a wide scale. Three years later, the company began manufacturing custom wood shapes for homebuilders.

Suddenly the stockpile of generic windows and doors at lumberyards wasn't the only option for homeowners.

"If they (bulk retailers) had 12 styles of windows and doors, they would make every house fit those 12 windows or 12 doors," Gionta said. "We had the ability to bring a lot more choice to customers that I don't think a normal distributor could do. We really became a distributor for windows and doors because of our ability to help customers and architects work through their choices. That wasn't the norm back in the day."

But one thing Rochester Colonial doesn't do is mass-produce anything. There's

100,000 square feet of property within the facility on Lyell, yet you won't find stacks of window type A or door type F.

"Everything has to be custom made," Gionta said. "It's made on a construction floor in a production way, but it's made for that house. If you want a special grid pattern, we have the ability to come up with that. We have our own pads people that can draw and design a lot of those types of things that you wouldn't get at your normal everyday lumberyard distributor type."

Driven by an innovative mind

Few people can get excited about a piece of machinery that shapes vinyl window molding or carves wood door molding. Gionta, however, is one of those people. He'd much rather be in one of the shops and part of the manufacturing process than in his office behind the computer.

That's how he's always been. He has never worked at any other business.

"My uncle would pick me up from school at Aquinas and bring me here and that's what I did from 2:30 to 5," Gionta said. "I wasn't a sports-minded kid; it just wasn't me. I was a skinny little scrawny kid and I was intrigued with tools, equipment, how things went together. I'm very analytical in terms of mechanics."

That curiosity and creative spirit led to the company's greatest innovation, the trademarked FoldUp window. The FoldUp resembles a traditional double-hung window but instead folds in and up, creating a much easier and safe assembly.

It was invented in 2013 and in 2015 won the Architizer A+ Award in the building products/windows category and was named a Top 100 New Product by This Old House magazine.

"One of the strengths of our company is innovation, and we have tried to be at the forefront of new products over the decades," Gionta said.

He doesn't really take credit for being the impetus behind the concept and creation of the FoldUp window. For Mark and his brother Paul, it's all about team of between 100 and 110 employees at Rochester Colonial.

"Anybody coming on here, at any level, literally plays a huge part in what we do," Mark Gionta said.

Truth be told, though, it was his mechanical, analytical mind that led to the FoldUp design. The company was working on a renovation of the Sherwood Inn in Skaneateles, Onondaga County and needed to replace the large, aging double-hung windows in the dining room.

Gionta kept envisioning waiters and waitresses, balancing on a chair, trying to lift the windows up so they could hook on the ceiling. He cringed. So he and his team began to brainstorm.

"We were laying out the design on the bench out back and I was seeing what our people were coming up with just to lift the big sash over somebody's head and try to hook it to the ceiling," he said. "They were trying to figure out a way to assist in that process. I was standing back and looking at it and thought, 'Geez, what if we cut it in half and fold it?'"

"I started grabbing hinges and coming up with a different way that a hinge could swing to be able to get that window open."

He insists it was a team effort.

"You start an idea and somebody else picks up another little piece of it and they throw it back on you and you figure out a way to tweak it and get over the next hurdle," Gionta said.

Said Monaco: "You will never hear Mark tout his own accomplishments. He put a team around him, but he had the technical expertise."

And Gionta's mind can definitely create.

"Honestly, there is nothing mechanical he can't figure out," Monaco said. "And it's not just windows and doors. He could build a nuclear power plant and I'd move next door."

That's because of the process that goes into any innovation. There must be testing and re-testing to ensure functionality. When the FoldUp window was still in the design stage, Gionta sought the expertise of Caldwell Manufacturing in Gates to create a spring to lift the window. And he asked the engineering experts at Rochester Institute of Technology to analyze and evaluate the movement to determine practicality and durability.

Maintaining excellence

"Let's prove it's going to last and it can be

repeated and we don't have to worry about any catastrophic issues down the road," Gionta said.

"One of the things that has really been important to me: I don't want to do anything that we can't repeat from an innovation point of view. If you can't be consistent in what you do and be able to replicate it over and over again, then it's not us. It's great to be innovative, but if it's just a one-off, it's just not good enough. You have to make sure you can repeat it."

That attention to detail extends through every facet of the company, from the showrooms to the fleet of 50-plus vehicles.

"Our trucks are exactly the same," Gionta said. "Every truck you get in, you'll know exactly where every tool is, where every screw is. We've tried to get our installers to follow the path that organization is good. It allows you get disciplined, it allows you to give the customer the same level of experience over and over again. Nothing is more important than that than the second call from that customer saying they want to buy more."

"We've been here for a long time doing the same thing every day and we've been able to grow through that process."

Gionta expects that growth to continue as younger family members come on board. His three children, Chris, Marissa and Adam, all work for the company. He also senses that Paul's three children will someday have a desire to become a part of the team.

"I think we're always going to grow because if you're not growing, you're going backwards," he said. "What I see is my kids developing very, very quick. Every day they bring a different dynamic that me and my brother couldn't bring to the business. The kids and even other young employees bring a whole, fresh dynamic."

"We've been able to bring the family dynamic into our company I think better than most companies. Me and my brother are very similar in mindset. We have some great people that work for us that really have become family members because they've been with us 25, 30 years. They live, eat and breathe Rochester Colonial," he adds.

Gionta admits some days it's nice to day-dream about going back in time, though.

"Moving into the office, that was like throwing cold water on me," he said. "I always have my tools. They didn't decommission me. They did throw me out of my truck, but I moved all my tools to the trunk of my car."

"My brother and I still have all our tools so if we have to go out and jump into a job, we can do it. We wouldn't have it any other way. We're Boy Scouts at heart. We're just being prepared, which is one of the best things the Boy Scouts teaches you. And my father always said you have to be prepared for anything."

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Mark Gionta

Title: President of Rochester Colonial Manufacturing Corp.

Age: 59

Education: Bachelor of Science, business, St. John Fisher College, 1983

Family: Wife, Lucy; children Chris, Marissa, Adam

Residence: Greece

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