

Ria decided that this would be an ideal time to return to the work force. In part to help with the college expenses but really to put herself into the community. She very quickly became an expert in the mortgage and contracts end of real estate.

Working at first for a firm called Berg Realtors, she then broke away with her new friend, Dottie Winhold who was forming Winhold Realty. Seen here, out with her new work girlfriends.



I was also making efforts to expand my network after our move. I had always seen value in fraternal organizations so – building on my history as a Knight of Columbus, an Alhambran, and an Elk –



It was the oldest club of its type in the nation. Talking to men from different industries expanded my view on the economy. Our Chapter met once a month for dinner and, from 1981-1999 (unless I was out of town), I was in attendance. I volunteered to be the Treasurer of our Edison/Metuchen Chapter. I also served on the Scholarship Committee for several years.

Not to suggest that I had severed all fraternal ties in Canada...

In fact, I'd been asked to join an alumni group of former Eaton's executives called "The Irregulars." It was a group of about fifty guys who'd left Eaton's and otherwise did well on their own.

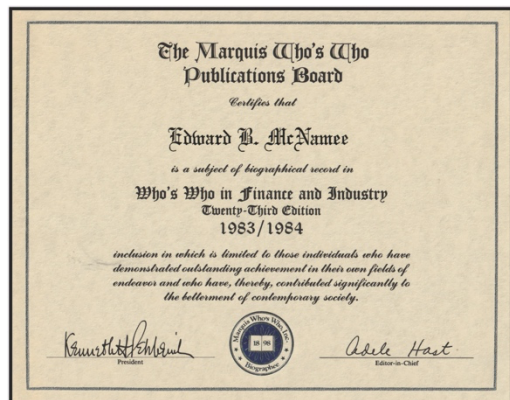


I suppose it was sort of an old-timers, hall of fame, kind of thing. John Craig and Freddie Eaton were members. Alf Charmers from my carpool was too. As was Alan Boothe and Hartley Cutten from our lunch crowd at the Silver Rail. For me, it was half networking and half nostalgia. I attended every year from 1982 until 2017. On two occasions I was the Keynote Speaker. Including the last time I went.

Membership requirements were that you had to have started at Eaton's very young and you had to have pushed a cart across Yonge Street. Having started in New York, they let me qualify on a technicality. They said, "At one point or another, you must have pushed a cart of samples or merchandise somewhere!"

Another fraternal order (of sorts) was our industry guild, The Bed, Bath & Linen Association. I had been an active member all along but by this point I was serving as Chairman of the Finance Committee. Our group scheduled Market Weeks and rented out the Jacob Javits Center, amongst other things.

And in 1983,
I was contacted by
Who's Who
about having my bio
printed in their annual
"Who's Who in
Finance & Industry."



The following year, The Bed, Bath & Linen Association asked me to serve as General Chairman for their Annual Golf Outing.

Enjoying
the event with
my buddy, Nick,
Mary Ellen Stanton,
John Doe,
and Derek Pierce.



Derek Pierce had emigrated to America from Bermuda on a fake I.D. We became fast friends. Fortunately for me, he landed a job buying linens and domestics for a chain of discount department stores and decided to give me all his business! Mary Ellen was a buyer for Gimbel's. (Later she wound up living in Metuchen!)

Derek was an extremely loyal friend. When he thought that his ex-wife wasn't marrying her boyfriend to keep the alimony and child support, he encouraged them to "become a family" for the sake of his daughter and promised to continue the same support.

One time I "expensed" a trip out to California to party with Derek by setting up a meeting with StarCrest (a mail-order outfit in Moreno Valley). To my surprise, I wound up doing a decent amount of business with them, for years to come!

The chenille was perfect for mail-order. It was a product that looked better unwrapped in your home than it ever could on a retail shelf. I really started emphasizing the chenilles to Fingerhut (another mail-order giant) and L.L. Bean as well.

One time a reticent assistant at L.L. Bean blurted out the obvious elephant, “But what about all that lint and fluff?”

I said, “They’re guaranteed to have lint. And ours will have just as much lint as anyone’s. But the customer won’t care. Or they haven’t cared up until now.” I didn’t stretch the truth. Not then, not ever, really. I wasn’t the typical salesman in that sense.

The simplicity of the truth always appealed to me, even beyond its moral assets. And, as I’ve said, I was all into streamlining. I had stopped carrying sample cases long ago. I preferred to go in like a gentleman with just a briefcase. I would ship cases ahead whenever necessary. But sometimes I wouldn’t even do that.

On several occasions, I traveled to The Messe Frankfurt – the world’s largest and oldest trade fair – with no plans of showing merchandise at all. My focus was entirely on entertaining the buyers who’d traveled over. I was free from the distractions of setting up a booth. And I would have all my lunch and dinner dates lined up in advance. Again, rugs were rugs (were rugs, were rugs), but a really excellent time in a great European city, they’d all remember!

This approach also meant that my time was open to opportunity. And observation! And also, to enjoyment. For a few years there in Frankfurt, I bowled as an honorary member of the Biederlack Blanket team. I never tried to push myself when I travelled. In all the time I worked for Georgia I rarely – if ever – was away over a weekend. I’d return on a Thursday, if possible, to settle back into my life and begin my weekend on renewed steam.

Market week in New York was a different story. It was a test of endurance. Thousands of buyers in from all over the country to see the new products and patterns. Plus, all our salespeople were in town from the various territories. It was a lot to navigate!

Thank goodness for Elena Fernandez, our Showroom Manager! Elena was there when I got there.

She had emigrated to the States from Cuba when she was 11. (She was 2 when Fidel Castro came to power.) She'd found her way to Georgia Textiles through a family friend who'd been on the cleaning staff in our building and learned of the opportunity.



When Elena started as Georgia's receptionist, the industry was very different. There used to be buyers in and out, all day long. They needed two people at the front, just to handle foot traffic. Now, only one was needed (if that). So, we started looking for other things for Elena to do. She began working with the customers.

She was a learner! When she arrived from Cuba, she didn't have any English. Public-school teachers often had little choice but to let her struggle forward on her own. In Elena's case, this harsh experience sharpened her ability to tune in to her surroundings. So, she was invaluable during Market Week (or any 'all-hands-on-deck' situation), but I soon noticed that my best information came from one of two sources, the Trade Association or Elena.

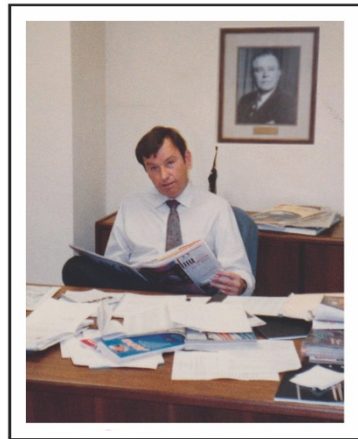
She had her eyes and ears on everything. She could always read between the lines and contrast the differences she saw between a person's words and their actions. We learned that having Elena with us on a sales call was like having your buddy watch the poker game to tell you – later – what everyone was holding, what they were doing, and what you should have done instead!

We started taking Elena everywhere.

During this particular Market Week, we were breaking in a new National Sales Manager. Ben Weinreb had left us. He took a job with Springs Mills to handle “special accounts.” He confided all of this to me before telling Tommy. I asked Elena if she could create a firewall between me and the mill until Ben told them. And then I left the office. I couldn’t be in that situation. I talked to Tommy and Jim most every day. The expectation of honesty between us was an asset that I didn’t want to lose.

When I disagreed with the Browns, I always said, “It’s my job to offer a truthful opinion.” But it was their family business. So, if they ever became set on something going a particular way, I rarely pushed. Bonus income was my only real concern, so I just needed to know that we weren’t putting our foot on the hose.

The new guy was Tony Benson. The office had never seemed like a sit-com until Benson showed up. You could have easily dropped him onto the set of Barney Miller to play the slightly cynical, sharp-witted rebel with an underlying talent and a flair for sabotage.



Tony was a championship glider pilot. It entirely suited his intrepid personality. There was a certain calculated recklessness to Tony that even people meeting him for the first time could sense. We had a lot of fun together!

There wasn’t much he was afraid to say. You just had to make sure he wasn’t speaking for you too. Before too long, he broke the Sears account in Chicago, and we were off to the races.

(The portrait over Tony’s shoulder is Thomas Jefferson Brown Sr.)

This is Spring Market Week, 1984, with Tony Benson & Larry Burn, a designer who'd come up from the mill to work with us (in case we needed to offer the same rug in a new and "exclusive" style).



I say this with some sarcasm since Georgia Textiles had not been known for innovation or competitive product development. Our competitors would introduce the new styles, the new yarns, and colors, and then once the industry was set on course, we'd finally meet with DuPont and do something brazenly similar.

Our strength was that we were a conservatively managed, financially sound business. And despite demand for chenilles going down – industry wide – over the next decade or so, we continued to produce a million bedspreads every year. In fact, our production was trending up! It seemed we were determined to be the last independent mill standing as one competitor after another sank or was subsumed. In many ways, we were no different than a buggy whip maker at the dawn of the auto age!

And as far as the range of patterns and designs – as I've already said – I was selling the company, not the product. To me, they were all basically the same. I could not honestly say to someone, "This rug here is for you." How could I know? That is, until everything came together in a rug I christened, The Midas Touch.



Mary LaRue was now Kmart's rug buyer. This is still before the rise of Amazon, or even Walmart, when Kmart was the biggest retailer in the U.S. with thousands of stores.

Mary had been wanting to do something with me for a while but was locked into programs that her predecessor had set up with Lawtex. But this rug was new, something Lawtex couldn't provide.

One of our freshly fallen competitors had a similar rug and when the owner of their mill came to work for us as a sales rep., he suggested we mint a copy. It wasn't just a shag, it had these hard, silvery threads dispersed throughout the pile to give it a shimmery look and a bouncy feel.

At first, Mary thought it would be too expensive for her, but Benson had the brilliant idea of mocking up three different weights, "Put'em all on the floor; let her pick her price point."

Kmart was also changing their rug displays at that time, from piles on tables to cubbies by color. This greatly enhanced the size of Mary's first order, which was over a million dollars. From that point forward, and for many years (until I retired), we did several million dollars a year on that rug – with Kmart alone!

And though the threads were silver, it became my golden goose.

The kids were graduating from Rutgers that year and I arranged for a business trip to Puerto Rico to coincide with Spring Break.

* The three of us stayed at the Condado Beach Marriott. It would have been their first exposure to what I did. We had an agency down there who represented us to the local stores as well as to buyers from the smaller islands at an annual show. I wanted to see what it was all about. In other years, Elena would go down.

(* I never charged Georgia Textiles for my family's expenses.)

The following year, I took Edward with me on a west coast sales trip: Colorado Springs, Scottsdale, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Though I wasn't trying to direct him into sales, I guess I wanted to expose him to (what I felt) was the fine art of business travel. His big take-away was how I gathered the co-workers from each office to join us for dinner – always at a round table – so they'd remember – as a group – what a phenomenal time they had.

But Edward's focus was on creating “a brand” for the little window washing business he'd run each summer during college. With his best friend (and Queues bandmate) Scott Hirshon, they incorporated Sparkles, The Student Window Washing Co. from our basement. (L-R: Scott, Ed, Greg Tufaro, Todd Poole)



In full uniform, with color coordinated tools, student employee, Josh Trutt.



To give commercial quotes, Edward wore formal green & yellow.

That fall, Ria and I celebrated the end of tuition payments with a tour of European cities.



I had been to Europe more times than I could reliably count but I'd never been there purely for pleasure. And I had never been there with Ria. Having Patrick & Patricia on board, made for one of the truly great trips of my life! Ria and Patricia chose destinations they most wanted to see: Paris, Florence, Venice, Lucerne, Pisa, and of course Roma!

With vacations, pictures are worth more than a thousand words.



In Paris, we visited all the obligatory sites. Ria loved viewing the Notre-Dame from our dinner cruise on the Bateaux Mouches.

We arrived in Venice by train and ferried down the length of the Grand Canal to the Bauer-Grünwald, a celebrated Venice hotel.



In Rome, we stayed at the top of the Spanish Steps.



Here, on one of our daytrips, the fountains of Villa d'Este, a 16th-century villa in Tivoli.

Another highlight for everyone was Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence, overlooking the unforgettable Lago Albano.