

Laborer of Love



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It isn't every day that you meet a person who uses words like "joy" and "honor" to describe hard labor, but Tony Dovidio isn't your average laborer. Tony talks about stone masonry the way others talk about art, history, or their life's passion. Perhaps that is because to his man his work is all of these things.



Tony Dividio of Anthony Dovidio Masonry, LLC is a second generation stone mason based out of Upper Black Eddy. Photo Credit: [Kristina Gibb Photography](#)

At only 36 years old, Tony has been working in stone masonry for more than 20 years – a trade that was taught to him by his father, Gerald Anthony Dovidio, who began working in the field as a young man. With children to feed and unable to afford a car, Tony’s father would hitchhike to work, hiding his tools in bushes along the side of the road. He worked hard and was taken under wing by a mason Tony knows as Mr. Gower. From him, Tony’s father learned both the mechanics and financial aspects of running the business. By the time Tony was a child, his father and mother, Colleen, were working together to support the family. “My mom actually helped mix mud, carry stone and bricks and stuff. She was hands on. After my father got some guys to work for him, she took a step back” and ran the business end of things.

Tony was about eight or nine years old when his father first took him to work. “My father decided it would be a good life lesson for me to go and learn how money was earned in our family.”

It was winter break, and Tony was recruited to the site of a block foundation being built in the snow and the cold. He shoveled mortar and hauled blocks. “I didn’t really like it,” he recalls. “I didn’t understand it, but I got a Gatorade and bacon-egg-and-cheese, and \$5 an hour... and a pack of baseball cards. I loved collecting baseball cards when I was younger.”

Despite his love for masonry not yet being born, Tony returned to work during subsequent summers and holiday breaks. After a few years, he began to enjoy the work, but he also felt as though he was missing out. A shift in focus to more typical teen-aged interests led Tony, who was raised mostly in Jamison, to soccer. He played well and was awarded a scholarship to Kutztown University after graduating from Central Bucks East. Speaking to him now, in a 200-year-old bank barn about his work, it comes as no surprise that Tony was a history major. But it would be another year and a game-ending injury before Tony would realize how masonry would afford him the opportunity to touch the history he was studying.



One of Bucks County oldest working barns, near Lake Nockamixon, where Tony recently completed a major restoration piece. Photo Credit: [Kristina Gibb Photography](#)

A torn MCL and a year of commuting to classes wore on him, while a gaining love of craftsmanship pulled Tony toward where he is today. The desire to finish college faded to the desire to master his trade, so he left college but he never stopped learning. “I’m a student for life. The universe is my university. I look for any facet of information I can get about my trade so I can be better crafts-person and a better person [overall].”

Now, he is certified by the Dry Stone Wall Association of Great Britain, mentored by renowned historic mason Robert Watt, and a co-administrator to a social media network where tens of thousands of stonemasons worldwide exchange stories, wisdom, and technique. Carrying his late father's striking hammer, Tony brings more than professional knowledge to his job sites. He brings a profound respect for the space and the life that was put into it.

"I've been called a purist," he admits. "I firmly believe...that anyone who buys a historic home or property should keep it as accurate as possible... Trying to modernize a historic property is counterproductive..." and it flies in the face of the tradesmen and sacrifice that went into the building. "By eliminating [the historic features] of the property, you've essentially stymied the very process of understanding the property itself and have erased the essential parts of our local history by bringing in modern concepts that do not match the home."

This professional philosophy is why Tony offers free and extensive consultations and inspections to buyers shopping for historic properties. The history he loves lives in those spaces, and he is committed to preserving and promoting that history by keeping it alive and functioning. Suddenly, our setting makes perfect sense.

The barn in which Tony chose to meet Kristina and me is one of the oldest working barns in Bucks County, and it is more than beautiful. It is breathtaking, but it is also breathing. The cool, dry air moving through the space is an attribute as noteworthy as its age and condition. The old cliché that "they just don't build them like they used to" is proven here, and it carries on the breeze coming through the open doors. Tony fills his lungs with the air and opens his hands to it as he explains that even at its centuries old age, the barn "still breathes and functions and expands and contractions on its own and doesn't have issues" like those of more modern composition. "A lot is lost in translation in this style (of building)... This building is 200 years old, and it's just needing repairs right now. I think that the lost art, the lost craftsmanship, the craftspeople – because women did the same work – is what we really should be going back to."



The first completed part of Tony's restoration work on the working farm is this 40' high wall that reaches from below the bank to the roof. Photo Credit: [Kristina Gibb Photography](#)

Though the bread and butter of Tony's business is far more ordinary – patios, paths, retaining walls, and so forth, he is eager to admit that it is the historic projects he loves the most. He has worked on many, including the Morgan James Estate in Chalfont. That love is easy to see as he gazes up at the stone walls, soaring ceilings, and timber beams, his blue eyes shining and his voice steady with pride and awe.

There is history in these projects, a sense of connection to that past. Looking at the 40-foot stone wall Tony recently rebuilt in what is his favorite project to date helps you understand that. He

gestures to it as he speaks about the technical and emotional aspects of the project. It is obvious that his work is about more than stacking stone and grabbing a paycheck. It is about something much bigger. It is about honoring the past and having a hand in something lasting. “I think about the people who gathered the stone from these fields when they were plowing them, and put them in a pile and said we are going to build our barn... or a house, or a spring house, or a milk house... Those are really beautiful things... People took time out of their lives and worked so much harder than I have to work to build these buildings, and I find an absolute, pure joy in being able to try to replicate the same process.”



Right back to work. The barn has been in constant use for about 200 years, including during the restoration process. Photo Credit: [Kristina Gibb Photography](#)

Talking about things like “hot lime” and “loam,” Tony isn’t just explaining the specifics of projects and processes. He is exuding love for the physical history he has put his time, sweat, and talents into preserving. He tells me the attributes, purposes, and challenges of various structures and design features, and how deconstructing walls can tell you by whom and about when they were built. Though Tony’s trade focuses on the stonework, his understanding and respect for these historic buildings extends well beyond that.

Moving to the center of the barn, Tony points out Roman numerals cut into the timber beams. This, he tells me, is how they used to organize the beams for assembly, so they knew which ones went where. Each was lifted into place with pulleys and manpower alone, Tony mentions. Hand-hewn with simple tools, the beams are each a “beautiful piece of craftsmanship that has lasted the test of time. I think people sort of overlook this style of work because we’ve gotten so used to using 2 x 4’s and pressure treated lumber, instead of using local materials that are still available.”

He pauses almost reverently and says, “If I wasn’t a stonemason...” He trails off a moment, then begins again. “In my next life, I’ll be a timber framer.”



Roman numerals carved into the beams served to make the location for each beam during the construction process. Photo Credit: [Kristina Gibb Photography](#)

The wood and stone and slate that make up this place seem to be stacked against all odds. The “hot lime” mortar of the day, Tony explains, was difficult to set. It could take weeks. Something as simple as an untimely rain could send walls crumbling and cause setbacks that might take months to correct. Yet, somehow, this barn and others like it manage to stand for hundreds of years. The magnitude of that is not lost on Tony. “People don’t realize all the effort and work that was put into it. It took years and years to build houses because you don’t have machinery; and when you’re working a field and you have a functioning farm, your primary focus was maintaining your livestock and then work in between to build your house or build your barn. [Meanwhile,] people slept in the same building that their animals slept in... They were so connected to the simple life.”

The notions of complexity and simplicity juxtapose often in our conversation. The irony of how something can be so fundamental and uncomplicated yet astounding and dynamic reveals itself repeatedly, both literally and figuratively. In fact, the theme is somewhat metaphorical as Tony moves on to talk about the history of masonry in various parts of the world, how simple needs were met with primitive engineering but eventually became a craft perfected by science and enhanced by education. As he speaks, it becomes apparent that the simple act of stacking stone is as deeply entwined with wisdom, sweat, and miracles as the civilizations it gave rise to.

Tony draws on his expansive professional and historical knowledge as he speaks, and his explanations bring you to the understanding that there is no difference in effort or relevance or value between structures as basic as property markers in early England and those as imposing as the White House. They all stand on the same foundation as this barn, and Tony gets that.

“It is tremendous honor to be able to rebuild a wall that is part of an operating building,” he smiles. “A lot of the barns are left to the wayside. They are focal pieces in their property but [property owners] don’t use them... This still operates. It is essentially performing the same function that it was a few hundred years ago. A farmer storing his hay... It’s traditional.”



A limestone carving Tony is working on for his wife, Carli, surrounded by his tools – including some that belonged to his father. Photo Credit: [Kristina Gibb Photography](#)

The thought of tradition spurs me to ask if Tony hopes the tradition of stone masonry will make it to a third generation in his family. With three sons, it very well could. His youngest is too small to tell, but his older boys – particularly his middle son – seem to have an interest. “I think there is a chance that one of them may want to join in the trade, which is pretty cool... That would be an honor.”

There’s that word again.