

PROFILE

Leading his firm into ninth decade

Richard Gianforti Jr. is the third-generation owner of Flower City Glass

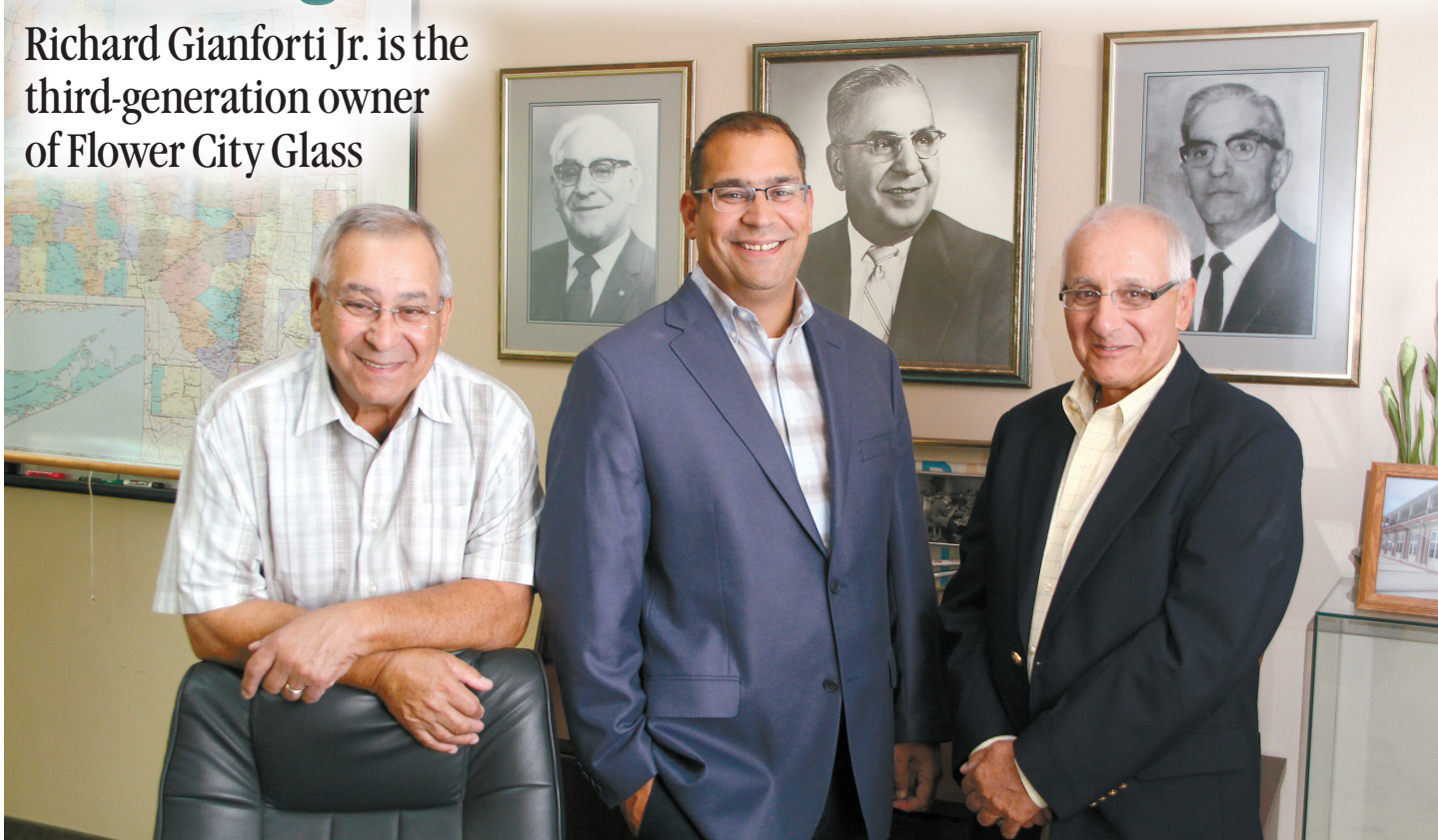


Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

Richard Gianforti Jr., center, purchased Flower City Glass from his father, Richard Gianforti Sr., at left, and his uncle, James Gianforti, seven years ago.

By VELVET SPICER

When Richard Gianforti Jr. talks about the work his company has completed on the new Golisano Children's Hospital, the pride he has for the project is evident in both his speech and demeanor.

The project personally brought him full circle.

"I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the children's hospital," says Gianforti, the 43-year-old owner and manager of Flower City Glass Co. of New York LLC. "When I was one week old, I had pneumonia and they brought me in and didn't think I was

going to make it. So, if it wasn't for the doctors and the staff over there, I might not be here today."

The glasswork in the new hospital is unique in its requirements and aesthetics, and roughly eight different types of glass were used in the new building. It is a project of which Gianforti and many of his staff are most proud.

"They say in our industry you're only as good as your last job," Gianforti says. "It was a difficult project, a tight timeline, a difficult site. So it was a very challenging and rewarding project because you know what good that's going to do for the community."

Golisano Children's Hospital is the lat-

est high-profile job Flower City Glass has completed in its nine decades of existence. The firm has worked on numerous jobs in and around the Rochester area, including projects for the City of Rochester, the University of Rochester, the Button Loft Apartments and area schools as well as the rooftop addition at the Strathallan.

Flower City Glass employs 65 people at its locations in Rochester and Syracuse, including 58 locally, and annually posts revenues of \$15 million to \$20 million, Gianforti says. Annual growth varies chiefly with the construction industry, he says, and 2015 is shaping up to be on target with last year's revenues.

"I think what's important is, we don't manage the top line," Gianforti says. "We concentrate on generating good work that's achievable and reasonable. We'll have down years where we'll still be successful, so we don't really gauge our success by the top line."

A family tradition

Flower City Glass was founded in 1924 by Gianforti's grandfather, Bert, and Bert's brothers, Joseph and Salvatore. The trio had moved from Buffalo to the Flower City to do local work for American Glass and Construction.

"They liked the city, and the three brothers decided they would take a stab at their own business," says Gianforti's father, Richard Gianforti Sr. "During the Depression years, their wives went to work to support them until they were profitable enough to take a salary. My mother worked as a hairdresser."

The company's primary business lines were automotive glass, residential work and small commercial glass projects such as gas stations and retail stores. When they started the family business, Bert worked as the business manager, while Joseph worked in the field and Salvatore, or Sam, as the family called him, did auto glass replacement.

Bert's son, Richard Sr., joined his father and uncles full time in the early 1960s, while his other son, James, joined the U.S. Army for three years before entering the family business.

With both sons in the business, Bert appointed James to oversee the auto-glass

division, known as Auto FX, as well as the residential division, while Richard Sr. handled the commercial division.

"I worked as a technician in the shop, worked my way up as my brother did, but in a different capacity," James recalls.

During the late 1960s through the 1970s, Flower City Glass grew dramatically, increasing revenue one hundredfold.

"In the late '60s, early '70s, we did our first million-dollar year," Richard Sr. recalls. "And the company just kind of grew from there."

"My dad and uncle have been with me, shaped me."

Shortly thereafter the two brothers took over the family business when their father, the last living founder, died.

"These guys," Richard Jr. says, pointing to his father and uncle, "took it from a mom-and-pop small business and made it into a mid-size business."

Like his father and uncle, Gianforti joined the family enterprise as a teenager.

"My dad put me to work pretty early, summers from when I was able to work," he says. "I spent a summer on the drafting board learning how to draw projects. I think it was important to him that I do a lot of different jobs in here and get varied experience in all aspects."

Although he never was told he had to join the family business, Gianforti says he wanted to carry the torch and fortunately he found the work interesting.

"It was tough at times. My friends were out playing games in the summer and I had to go to work and work an eight-hour shift," he recalls. "But in retrospect it taught me a lot about life and people and work. It was hard work, but it was something I really wanted to be a part of to carry on the family tradition."

He purchased the company from his father and uncle seven years ago.

Company services

While the auto-glass side of the business is no longer as lucrative as it was several decades ago, Flower City Glass still operates each of its original divisions, Gianforti notes. Its auto-glass side offers replacement and repair as well as mobile glass services.

Its commercial construction, or contract division, is the company's primary revenue generator. The work includes installation of and service on windows, skylights, entrances, and specialty and decorative glass.

"Our commercial service division is really kind of our lifeblood," Gianforti says. "Between our contract division and our service division, I think that accounts for

80 to 85 percent of our annual revenue."

The company specializes in estimating and design work, and while Flower City Glass is not a manufacturer, the company does buy some raw product to fabricate and install. The firm has a residential division that installs window and door products, as well as shower enclosures and shower doors, custom cut mirrors and glass for home interiors.

Flower City Glass still operates a retail side of the business as well, so customers can visit the Mt. Hope Avenue facility to order a new window or tabletop.

Quality, service and hard work long have been stressed at Flower City Glass, the Gianfortis say. Their employees are rewarded for their hard work; in return, the company gets longevity, production and loyalty.

"Servicing the customer was always uppermost in our minds, making sure the customer was happy because you want them to return for additional business," Richard Sr. says. "We're demanding, but we don't have a lot of turnover. We have employees who have been with us 30 or 40 years."

James Gianforti is retired from the family business, but Richard Sr. continues to work a couple of days a week and visits the Syracuse office on Thursdays to check on things, he says.

"He still contributes," his son says. "He helps get job sites or helps to quote work when we're backlogged. It keeps him sharp, keeps him engaged. He enjoys it, so I would never want to take that away from him."

Gianforti says his short-term goals for the company are to move the facility to a location with room to grow.

"We are looking for opportunities in the city as our first choice, but I wouldn't rule out a suburban location," he says.

Expansion to other markets, either within New York or outside the state, are a possibility long term, Gianforti says, noting that adding another geographical location will help balance the ups and downs that come with working in a cyclical environment.

Being a family-owned business has helped with Flower City Glass' success, James says.

"We're heavily invested in the community from a sales point of view and philanthropic activities we've engaged in over the span of 50 or 60 years," he explains. "And our loyalty to our vendors has helped our longevity."

Adds Richard Sr.: "Being in the community for so many years is a testament to the fact that the community has faith in our ability to do the job and do it right. An enormous amount of our business is repeat

Richard Gianforti Jr.

Position: Owner and manager, Flower City Glass Co. of New York LLC

Age: 43

Education: B.S. in business, Ithaca College, 1994; M.S. in business management, Nazareth College, 2004

Family: Wife, Julie; sons JP, 8, and Bennett, 5; and daughter, Megan, 5

Home: Mendon

Outside activities: Sports, including football, lacrosse and paddle tennis; history buff; road trips with family

Quote: "When you're in a low-bid environment and you have to eat what you kill, so to speak, it's a constant challenge. But having that challenge and being able to have successes, it's motivation."

business.”

Challenges and opportunities

Although in recent years the company has been on a growth trajectory, that was not always the case. In 1994 Flower City Glass filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. But rather than dwell on the negative a bankruptcy can suggest, Gianforti looks at the time period as a positive for the firm.

“It forced us to operate efficiently. It got rid of some of the dead weight,” he says. “We had to get creative to accomplish work. I think it kind of molded the way we operate today into being efficient.”

Bankruptcy should be looked at as a tool, says Ron Castor, who handled the company’s finances just prior to and during its filing. Castor left the company in 1999 and works for a turnaround firm. Flower City Glass’ bankruptcy was in part a result of rapid growth, he says.

“Bankruptcy gives you a chance to reorganize your company and forgives some of your sins. And as a result it allowed them to reset the foundation, which is a very strong foundation,” Castor says. “It’s been over 20 years and they’ve been able to stay on that foundation and grow and change.”

Gianforti says the company’s staff plays a large role in its success.

“We’re just kind of coaches,” he says. “The players are the people who are doing, getting the things installed, ordering the material correctly or fabricating. We have some pretty talented people who work hard to achieve the goals we set.”

The organization’s biggest challenge is training and developing employees, Gianforti says.

“We’re a specialized industry so industry knowledge is something we place big importance on,” he says. “Finding skilled employees that want to work to replace some of those employees that are retiring is a difficult thing.”

The regulatory requirements of the industry can be daunting as well, Gianforti says. Keeping a constant workflow also can be a stressor.

“Our work is seasonal. Summer is crunch time,” he says. “We have no control over the construction schedule. Our work is kind of pieced in after this guy or this guy. It’s a moving target.”

The challenge keeps him coming back for more, though.

“When you’re in a low-bid environment

and you have to eat what you kill, so to speak, it’s a constant challenge,” Gianforti says. “But having that challenge and being able to have successes, it’s motivation.”

Gianforti also enjoys working with the people he and his predecessors have hired through the years.

“It’s a great place to work. It’s a fast-moving, hard-hitting environment where we are very schedule-driven,” says 18-year veteran Derek Ristau, vice president of the contract division. “It’s pretty dynamic. It’s hard to get stale.”

Ristau agrees the company’s success is in part due to its people.

“It starts at the top,” Ristau says. “Richie is extremely involved. He’s a third-generation owner who really is the heartbeat of the company.”

Service manager Chris Triest calls Gianforti a hands-on leader when he has to be, but one who allows his managers to manage.

“He has the people he put in positions to make things go well and he trusts them to do their job,” Triest adds.

When Castor was with Flower City Glass, he had the opportunity to work with both the second and third generations of leadership.

Castor describes James’ style as progressive; he was the first mobile auto glass installer in the region, and the company also installed mobile phones when they became widely available for cars.

Richard Sr.’s leadership style was classic, Castor recalls—he was more analytical than his brother and looked more at budget and time constraints.

“I liked both their styles. It was fun to work for both of them because they were different,” he says, adding that Gianforti has adapted his father’s and uncle’s styles into his own.

Gianforti says his strengths are his industry knowledge and his understanding of the construction process, as well as his problem-solving skills.

“I think one thing my dad and uncle taught me is to try to make an opportunity out of a problem,” Gianforti says. “But I think sometimes I can be a little too conservative. I do a lot of analysis and sometimes certain risks we’ll shy away from. That could be a problem.”

The best part of his job is seeing a complex situation being dealt with appropriately.

His advice to the next generation of entrepreneurs is to keep at it.

“Work hard to overcome your obstacles,” he says. “Don’t give up too easily.”

At home

Born and raised in Rochester, Gianforti now makes his home in Mendon. He and his wife, Julie, have three children: sons, JP and Bennett, and daughter, Megan. Bennett and Megan are twins.

Road trips with his wife and kids are favorite family memories, but he also recalls visiting the Thousand Islands as a child with the rest of the Gianforti family and spending time on a houseboat.

“They used to drag me fishing and I hated it,” he says with a laugh. “You get up in the morning and sit out there in the cold.”

Gianforti is a history buff, as well as an avid sports fan. He played football and lacrosse growing up, and helps coach lacrosse now. He is in a paddle tennis league, but calls himself one of the worst players in Rochester.

The Gianforti family has a long history of giving back to the community, he says. He is on the board of directors for Holy Childhood and a member of the Rochester Rotary Club, and has supported Al Sigl Community of Agencies, the United Way of Greater Rochester Inc. and Mary Carola Children’s Center, among others.

Gianforti says one person who has changed his life is his wife.

“She helped me be comfortable with myself and be more confident and accepting,” he says. “It’s not one thing she did but the way we had chemistry together.”

Gianforti’s mentors have long been his father and uncle, he says.

“My dad and uncle have been with me, shaped me. Working with them and seeing how they handle issues really gave me insight,” he says. “I got to see behind the scenes what it’s like to deal with complex issues and tough problems and see how they evaluate it.”

Former employee Castor says the longevity of the company is something to be celebrated.

“I can’t tell you how many companies fail just from generation one to the second generation. This one’s gone not only from one generation to a second, but also went from the second to the third in a very tough industry, the construction arena, and dealing with customers on the retail side,” Castor explains. “It’s a credit to the family and the company to be able to survive that long.”

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