

[FALL09]

# Encore

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES ALUMNI AND FRIENDS

A photograph of two men in dark suits and ties standing on a sidewalk in front of a large brick building with many windows. An American flag is visible on a pole to the right. The man on the left has his arm around the man on the right.

**All in the Family – Alumni  
Share Their Thoughts on  
Family Business**



**Northeastern University**  
*College of Professional Studies*



4



12



8

## CONTENTS [FALL09]

### 2 Family Matters

Dean Christopher E. Hopey

### 4 Building a Family Legacy

Paul Stella ('63) Turns Family Vocation into Successful Construction Business

### 8 Smooth Sailing for BoatZincs.com

Maryanne Olsen's ('91) Niche Family Business is Keenly Focused on Customer Service, Supplier Relationships and Product Expertise

### 12 Building Family Business the General Way

Entrepreneur Frank Granara ('92) on the Hard Work and Fun of Growing General Insulation

### 16 Recent Events

### 18 Of Note

### 20 Faculty Profiles: Chris and Melanie Brooks

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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MELROSE VETERANS MEMORIAL  
MIDDLE SCHOOL

*building a family*  
**LEGACY**

**Paul Stella ('63) Turns  
Family Vocation into  
Successful Construction  
Business**

**“OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY HAVE TO LIKE WHAT THE BUSINESS IS ABOUT. THEY HAVE TO DECIDE THAT THIS IS WHAT THEY WANT TO DO. THEN THEY HAVE TO HAVE A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH ALL MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY—FROM ME, MY WIFE, KIDS DOWN TO GRANDKIDS.” Paul Stella**

**P**aul J. Stella ('60, '63), CEO of P.J. Stella Construction, knew at a very young age that his family's history as construction workers would set the course for his future career. He recalls listening to his two grandfathers, one a laborer, the other a brick-layer, both Italian immigrants, talk about their jobs in construction.

“They taught me simple lessons,” says Stella. “Work hard, be honest, always maintain your integrity, regardless of what you are doing, and you will succeed in life and be respected.”

Stella also had a favorite uncle who was a project superintendent with a major Boston construction company.

“I would marvel at the stories he would tell me about the projects he was managing,” Stella recalls. “It was always a thrill to visit the projects with him and see the buildings being built.”

He cherished his young years working during summer vacations with his brother as a helper for his father's small local plumbing business.

“Construction was in my blood. I always knew that this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

### Learning the Trade

Upon graduating from high school in 1953 Stella joined the Naval Reserve and went on active duty immediately. Following his discharge in 1956, and utilizing the benefits of the Korean War G.I. Bill, he enrolled in evening programs at Northeastern University to pursue an associate degree in Civil Engineering at Lincoln Institute. During this time, he worked as a draftsman for two construction-related engineering firms in Boston, where he learned blueprint reading, a skill that would become beneficial later when he worked in the field on construction projects. In less than two years working as a draftsman and visiting job sites to inspect the designs with which he was involved, he realized that his main goal was to secure a position with a major construction company and put his education to use.

Stella attained an entry field engineer position with Vappi & Co. His first assignment was at the construction site of a new building for the New England Conservatory of Music. This project was conveniently located next to the Northeastern campus, allowing him to work full-time at the site all day, and then walk a short distance to attend his evening classes.

When I was attending Northeastern at night, I used to go there after work to attend class,” explains Paul. “I was working on some big projects in Boston for Vappi and the other students would ask me questions and I arranged to give student tours of the jobs out in the field, which I did, and they loved it.”

During that time, Stella married his childhood sweetheart, Adrienne, in September of 1957. In 1959 they began raising their family. They have three children, Stephanie, Joseph and Paulette.



Paul Stella with wife, Adrienne and son, Joe.

Paul worked hard to balance his new family life while working at his full-time construction job during the day, attending classes at Northeastern three to four nights a week, and finding time to study. In June 1960 he earned his Associate degree in Civil Engineering from Lincoln Institute. With his sights set on starting his own construction company, he decided to continue his studies for another two and a half years at University College, earning a BBA degree in 1963.

“My experience of attending evening classes at Northeastern for six and a half years taught me that hard work and the desire to succeed would become the basis for starting my own company,” explains Stella.

### Laying the Foundation

the knowledge gained from Northeastern coupled with his experience in the construction industry, Stella, with full support of his wife, decided to begin P.J. Stella Construction Corp. in 1971.

“It was a big gamble, considering that we only had a small sum of money to invest in the firm,” explains Stella.

Most of the first two years, the company consisted only of his wife and himself. Paul did all of the estimating, construction management and other duties required to run the operation while his wife managed all of the financial functions. At that time, their children were 8, 10 and 12 years old.

“Adrienne was an angel,” recalls Paul.

Adrienne worked part-time, at no salary, to help the company grow, and also managed to run the household and raise their children while Paul worked long days in the field supervising the construction and nights at home handling the paperwork necessary to manage a successful project.

Realizing that he had much to learn about running a company, Paul decided to join the Massachusetts chapter of the Associated General Contractors. The AGC is the premier national association for general contractors, with local chapters in all states. The guidance and mentoring that he received from several owners of established AGC member contracting firms was invaluable. With their help, Paul was able to learn and apply the principles of marketing, management, finances, bonding, human resources and many other construction-related subjects to his business.

P.J. Stella Construction became very active in both the local chapter and at the national level of the Association. At the local level, Paul has chaired several committees and he served as Chapter President for two terms (1985 and 1986). At the national level, he served as AGC of America's Chairman of the Building Division and then national Treasurer in 2002. He is also a life member of the AGC of America Board of Directors. Currently, he is on the Executive Board, which governs the affairs of AGC of America.

During its first year, P.J. Stella Construction operated out of the Stella home. By 1974 they were building three to five projects per year. At that point, feeling confident that the company would prosper, Paul began to hire personnel for both the field and office to carry out the duties he was performing. During this growth period, his wife, Adrienne, continued on a full-time basis performing all of the financial operations of the firm. Today, Adrienne is still active as the Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer of the company.

"I think family businesses, especially small to medium-size businesses, really have a lot to do with having an impact on how the economy goes," says Paul. "What we do affects a lot of people and their families. We try to plan accordingly. This is probably the worst downturn in my 30-plus years. This has had more of an impact on us for work and overall trying to stay ahead of the pitfalls. But I think it's on the way up. If you run a good company and have all the family members behind you, you'll weather the storm."

### Growing the Family and the Business

The growth of P.J. Stella Construction paralleled the growth of Adrienne and Paul's family. Their son, Joseph, developed an interest in construction while working for P.J. Stella Construction in the field during all of his high school and college vacations. He attended Worcester Polytechnic Institute and graduated with a degree in Construction Management/Civil Engineering.

Before he entered the business full-time, he also worked for Vappi & Co. for approximately two years, gaining valuable experience as a construction engineer on large-scale projects, which he would later apply to P.J. Stella Construction. Following his two years with Vappi, he returned to the family business where he took on increasing management responsibilities. While he worked days, he attended law school at night and earned a Juris Doctor degree. His legal training is an asset in managing the intricacies the firm faces on a regular basis in a complex contracting industry.

In 2001, following the succession plan created by Paul, Joe became President of the company and Paul remained active as the Chief Executive Officer. In his new role, and concentrating on educational projects, Joe increased the company's volume of work, with annual revenues exceeding \$20 million per year.

P.J. Stella Construction has built more than 30 school projects in the greater Boston area and suburbs of Massachusetts, as well as in New Hampshire and Maine.

Paul notes, "In fact, our most recently completed Melrose Middle School, a \$42 million project, was just selected as an 'AGC Build New England' award winner. We are very proud of that accomplishment."

"I'm coming in as the second generation," explains Joe. "What I have observed is that you have to have a passion, have to be committed and you have to work hard. As a family member, you have to understand what that's all about. You also have to balance everything, especially work and family. I watched my father work hard day in and day out. Where he was successful was taking the family atmosphere and extending it to everyone else in the company. It's about developing that culture."

Paul has continued to grow the family legacy of P.J. Stella Construction. His son-in-law, Mark Klove, joined the firm in 1988 as a Project Manager/Estimator. Nine years ago, Paul's daughter, Paulette, also joined the business as an Administrative Assistant.

Planning for the future generation of the company, Joe's son, Joseph Jr., is pursuing an education in construction management and civil engineering and he has worked on P.J. Stella Construction projects during his school vacations and plans to join the family business upon graduating from college. Paul's other grandson, Chris (the son of Paul's eldest daughter), will also enter college this fall to study civil engineering and plans to work for P.J. Stella Construction.

"We're very fortunate that we really never had any issues. First of all I think the other members of the family have to like what the business is about. They have to decide that this is what they want to do. Then they have to have a good relationship with all members of the family—from me, my wife, kids down to grandkids."

Paul has built a company based upon integrity, trust, and hard work. His inspiration and desire for a lasting legacy mirrors his favorite quote by the 19th century critic, John Ruskin, who said, "When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendents will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, 'See! This our fathers did for us.'" ■

*Paul Stella founded P.J. Stella Construction Corp., a closely held and family-run general contracting business in 1971. He now serves as CEO. The award-winning firm has a track record for delivering quality construction services for a wide variety of industries. The firm has had the opportunity to work with some of the leading owners, architectural firms and subcontractors in New England. P.J. Stella believes that its continued growth and the cornerstone of its success has been the combination of responsible leadership, honesty, trust and good work.*