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Following in dad's footsteps

Valley business owners keep their ventures all in the family

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Some Valley fathers are sharing their entrepreneurial spirit with their children, who are taking the torch and running with it. In celebration of Father's Day, June 19, the *Phoenix Business Journal* talked with families who are running two local businesses.

Jerry Meek and his father, Gerold, founded Desert Star Construction Inc. in 1978.

Gerold Meek, who describes his age as "80-something," already had been in the construction business for a long time, owning G. Meek Construction prior to launching Desert Star with his son.

"In the old days, that was really what the hope was: that you would have something to give your sons and your daughters," he said. "You really only dream about things like this."

Their company creates custom homes in the \$1 million-plus range while also focusing on new commercial and renovation projects. Desert Star was the contractor behind the renovation of El Chorro Lodge in Paradise Valley.

"I think about some of the houses I built. Back in those days, they were about 800 square feet. I am just blown away," Gerold said.

Another Valley family also has kept its hands in the family dough, literally, through two generations.

Patriarch Ken Spinato started Spinato's Pizzeria in 1974 after buying out a business partner and hanging the family name on a pizza joint at 68th Street and McDowell Road in Scottsdale. When that lease ran out, the restaurant moved to a new spot in Tempe. The family now has five pizzerias across the Valley.

"Being the boy in the family, my dad took me to

SEE FATHERS | 53



Three generations of the Meek family run Desert Star Construction Inc.: clockwise from left, Jerry, Jonathan, Jeremy and Gerold.

JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

FATHERS: Generations teach entrepreneurial spirit

FROM PAGE 3

his work a lot more than my sister," said Anthony Spinato. "Back then, we helped my dad rough (and) knead dough, break up cheese after it came out of the grinder, mix sausage and do lots of dishes."

Ken still is involved in the operations, but Anthony and his sister, Nicole Spinato Kienlen, now lead the business's daily operations with the help of a number of other relatives, including both Anthony's and Nicole's spouses.

OLD SCHOOL MEETS NEW

Gerold Meek also takes a more hands-off approach these days with his son at the helm of Desert Star. The construction company has gone through several real estate busts and booms in the Valley, including the Great Recession.

While Desert Star was impacted, the Meeks declined to reveal financial details about the privately held company.

The company reorganized its internal operations during the recession to make processes more effective, focus on its core business and develop a strong sustainability aspect. A third-generation family member, 24-year-old Jeremy Meek, is involved in that aspect of the company.

His brother, 21-year-old Jonathan, is working as an intern at Desert Star.

"A lot of people are looking at long-term costs, and that is what sustainability is all about. It's about taking a holistic approach to building," Jeremy said.

Anthony Spinato said it was his father's focus on the financial nuts and bolts of the company that helped it survive the recession and ultimately expand as a result.

"His is an old style of running a business. Because of that, we have had cash flow, managed through this recession and also had an opportunity to buy a building and expand," he said.



PROVIDED BY SPINATO'S PIZZERIA

Ken Spinato launched Spinato's Pizzeria in 1974, and now his children help run the company's five Valley restaurants.

Anthony and Nicole meet with their father every two weeks to update him on the business, including their recently opened fifth restaurant, on Chandler Boulevard in Ahwatukee.

The company bought the building along with the land underneath, an important asset in an industry that typically only leases retail space.

"His plan has come true, and it's his planning that has given us this opportunity," Anthony said.

NOT MY KID

Even when it's family-run, business still is business. With that philosophy in mind, Jerry Meek said neither of his boys is getting special treatment at work.

"They are not related to me on the job. They have to be able to do the job, and do the job well," he said.

Anthony Spinato said he didn't get any breaks as the owner's son, either. He said when he was a teenager, his dad would hand him a mop in the restaurants. And while it wasn't the easiest of jobs, Anthony said he understands his father's approach.

"A great way to lead people is by example," he said. "If you understand

everybody's role, you have a better understanding of the entire restaurant. It's not only important for leadership, but also from an operational standpoint."

A NEW GENERATION

Even as an intern, Jonathan Meek is becoming heavily involved in the family business.

His internship isn't about fetching coffee or driving around a company car. He's up at 4:30 a.m. and on a Desert Star construction site an hour later.

As an assistant superintendent, he manages the scheduling of the various subcontractors involved in a project. Any scheduling snafu can result in project delays and additional costs.

"They don't really know my name, and that's nice," Jonathan said of his business interactions. "I am just working hard and doing my best."

Jerry Meek said he's proud of his boys, but he knows if an entrepreneur doesn't love the work, it might not last — and he wants his children to be happy.

"If they are doing it for me, that is the wrong motivation," he said.

Jeremy said both his father and his grandfather have pointed that out many times.

"They have told both of us to go out and do whatever we wanted," he said.

With Ken Spinato's focus on financials, budgets and the importance of knowing all the ins and outs of a restaurant operation, Anthony said he hears his dad's lessons all the time.

"There were a lot of things that he would say to me growing up, and I was listening, but it's amazing how much I remember — and how right he was," Anthony said.

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