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Company of the Month: It's all about family - J.C. Cannistraro celebrates 50 years in the business

May 30, 2013 - Spotlights

In 2007, a book was published about the life and career of John Cannistraro, Sr. The first chapter of the book was titled "Sunday in Waltham;" a very fitting title for anyone who knows the history of J.C. Cannistraro, LLC. As the story goes, John Sr., or "Mr. C," fulfilled his lifelong dream of becoming an entrepreneur with nothing more than \$1,500 and a pickup truck. When "Mr. C" started the business he worked out of his own Waltham apartment, was the firm's only employee and relied on his loving wife Rita to volunteer as his secretary. Through hard work, skilled labor and dogged determination, John Sr. grew his firm into an award-winning mechanical contractor and one of the largest privately owned companies in Greater Boston.

Family Values

The principles that guided John Cannistraro, Sr. at the reins of J.C. Cannistraro were rooted in those "Sundays in Waltham." As one of seven children in a large Italian-American family, John learned the importance of family, pride in one's work and respect for those around him. Years later, when John was a businessman with a family of his own, he kept these lessons close to the heart by always coming home in time for dinner - no matter what the work day brought him. For John Cannistraro, instilling the family dynamic into his business relationships was what defined success. Fifty years later, John Sr. has since retired, yet the family dynamic fostered around the Sunday dinner table remains a vital part of the culture of J.C. Cannistraro, LLC. If you ask anyone who works for, with or around the company, you'll learn that they consider themselves to be part of the family. In fact, when asked in a recent survey to describe the company using only one word, three-quarters of Cannistraro employees replied with the word "family."

So how does a mechanical construction company exhibit the qualities of a family? It does so by respecting its employees, striving for continuous improvement and recognizing the importance of building lasting relationships with clients and the surrounding community. For employees, life at Cannistraro is more than just a job. They all take pride in their work and pride in the firm's sterling reputation (a reputation that they have each helped build over the years). Cannistraro's talented employees learn from one another and thrive wherever there is an opportunity for collaboration.

Teamwork & Collaboration

Cannistraro employees know that the company is committed to providing them with the tools they need to succeed. Whether it was 3D modeling software long before BIM became an industry requirement, state-of-the-art automated welding machines at the fab-shop or iPads for foremen in the field, members of the Cannistraro team are collectively seeking out ways to leverage technology to build safer, more efficiently and more effectively. On the Ames Boston Hotel project back in 2009,

for example, the Cannistraro team suggested moving the entire mechanical room to the roof in a prefabricated, modular box to allow the owner to repurpose space in the basement. Then there was the Genzyme Biologics Support Center, a high-profile laboratory/office complex in Framingham, Mass., where Cannistraro's plumbing and HVAC teams collaborated to suggest the use of prefabricated, multi-trade utility racks; a bold opportunity to drive the construction schedule and minimize onsite safety risks. In many ways it is the culture and dynamic of the company that facilitates the collaborative, family-centric behavior found at Cannistraro's Watertown headquarters, its Wilmington fabrication facility or any of its job-sites throughout New England.

Mentoring is also critically important to the Cannistraro culture and the sustainability of the firm through the third generation. Multiple co-op students from New England's leading engineering and architecture programs come on board each semester to work side-by-side with estimators, coordinators and assistant project managers on the most complex mechanical installations. It is common for students to complete two or even three co-op semesters and then join the firm full-time after graduation. Students want to work with the best people and for the best companies. With each passing year, the list of employees with ten, fifteen and twenty years of service at the firm grows longer, as does the number of students who interview for Cannistraro internships. The confluence of experienced industry veterans and eager-to-learn, tech-savvy young professionals, results in a more complete, diverse company that is readier to collaborate than ever before.

Giving back

The other key ingredient to Cannistraro's family recipe for success is an unwavering commitment to the community. As a small, local business in the early 1960s, Cannistraro was fortunate to have opportunities to showcase its merit. Company leadership has never forgotten the firm's origins and tries to provide opportunities to others every chance it gets. The firm is actively involved in countless industry associations that work to better the building trades and the New England construction industry at large. From the Massachusetts Building Congress, to the PHCC of Greater Boston, the Associated Subcontractors of Massachusetts, the New England Mechanical Contractors Association and the International Facility Management Association, Cannistraro is engaged at every phase of the industry. Internally, the commitment to the surrounding community turned into the formation of Team Cannistraro, an employee-organized charitable giving initiative. At annual fundraisers and charity events coordinated by the employees themselves, Cannistraro matches every dollar raised by Team Cannistraro throughout the year. In addition to its support of Team Cannistraro, the company has proven that its commitment to corporate social responsibility is not limited by borders. When a disastrous earthquake struck Haiti in January of 2010, Cannistraro leadership quickly decided that they had to find a way to help. After connecting with the non-governmental organization Partners in Health, Cannistraro agreed to be a fundraiser, contributor and project partner for the rebuilding of a world-class hospital in Mirebalais, Haiti. Over the next two years, the company raised more than a million dollars in funds and in-kind donations, provided engineering and prefabrication services and provided on the ground training to Haitian plumbers.

This year marks Cannistraro's fiftieth anniversary in business. Much has changed since Mr. C first drove the truck for J.C. Cannistraro back in June of 1963. While the technology has advanced, the buildings have become more complex and the workforce has grown, one fact has never changed about the people, processes and projects that make up the Cannistraro story - family matters.