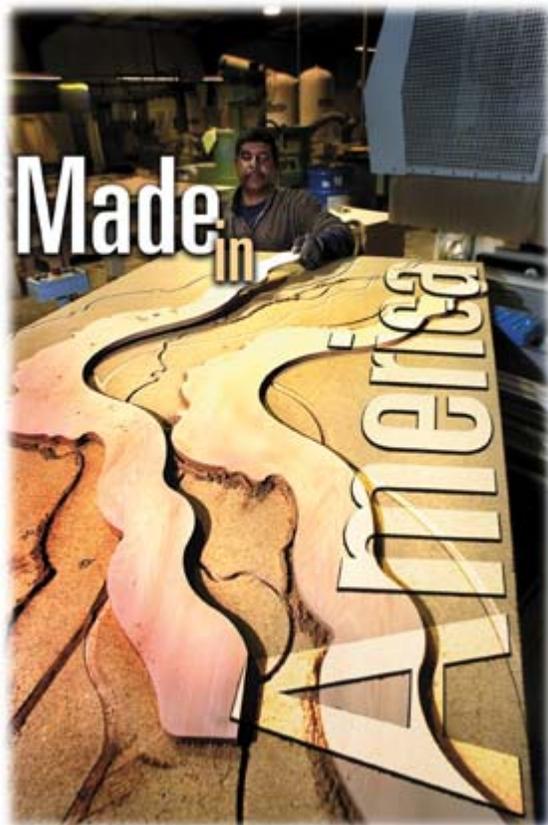


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"I don't do legs. I do furniture. – Rick Mariani, Sorrentino & Mariani "

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COVER STORY

Built in Norfolk USA

Furniture business grew from humble beginnings

By **Laura Laing**

Inside Business - Hampton Roads

Monday February 7, 2005

If you've booked a room at a New Orleans luxury hotel, chances are you'll slumber in a bed made right here in Hampton Roads.

Tucked away off Tidewater Drive in Norfolk is the Sorrentino & Mariani Company, a full-service contract furniture manufacturer. Providing bedroom furniture for hotels throughout the U.S. and the Caribbean, the company focuses on mid- to upper-end and custom beds, dressers, night stands and entertainment centers. Rick and Felicia Mariani have been in business for 25 years – one year less than their marriage – even after many small furniture companies have fallen by the wayside.

Churning out 4,000 pieces each month, the small factory hums like a well-oiled machine. The scent of nail polish remover, used to speed up the lacquer-drying process, hangs in the air, and saws buzz in unison. Workers in jumpsuits assemble, sand, spray and inspect furniture that began as blueprints and big panels of wood. Things are hopping at Sorrentino & Mariani.

But the business had humble beginnings. The Marianis got their start in Lynchburg, after Felicia was transferred from Portsmouth as a visual merchandizing director for Leggett. A Virginia certified nurseryman, Rick expected to start a landscaping business, but the pay in Lynchburg was so bad that he decided to find another career.

“We bought a real old house in Lynchburg,” Felicia said. “And Rick started doing some woodworking.”

Using his great-grandfather's old hand tools, he set up a shop behind the couple's 1890 home in the historic Diamond Hill section of downtown Lynchburg. The hobby became a job and then a career, Rick said, and before they knew it, they were running a furniture company.

The couple chose a name that they felt demonstrated quality, using Felicia's maiden and married names. “We're Italians, and everyone knows Italians make the best furniture,” she said.

Sorrentino & Mariani expanded three times in Lynchburg, buying larger workshops and warehouses, until they were playing with the big boys. By the mid-'80s, the

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company had become an overflow factory to some of the largest furniture companies in the country, providing additional stock that these companies were unable to handle in their own factories.

Soon they began selling direct and finally found the hospitality market.

“We didn’t have the capital to get into retail, where you build an inventory and hope it sells,” Rick said. Hotels contract the company to make a certain number of bedroom sets, which they produce on deadline.

In 1992, Felicia retired from Leggett. She and Rick sold their business to a company from China in 1994. And in 1996, they started over in Norfolk.

“We decided to come home,” Felicia said.

In their first year in Norfolk in 1996, they squeaked by with \$200,000 to \$300,000 in revenue. The city’s economic development department took the company under its wing, Felicia said, letting them know that they could receive incentives because of their location in HUD, empowerment and enterprise zones.

Ironically, their biggest problem was a lack of competition.

“If you move to High Point, you have 300 furniture factories. So hiring someone to run this would be easy,” Rick said. As it was, the couple had a hard time finding skilled employees. So they took advantage of a state workforce development program. Worker retention is a huge issue, since it takes three years to train an employee.

“Some employees have been with us for five years,” Felicia said.

Careful planning has obviously paid off. Last year’s projected revenue for the company was \$3.5 million. But the company brought in \$5 million, an 80 percent increase in sales over the previous year. This year, the Marianis bumped their projection to \$9 million, but they’ve already booked \$4.8 million for the first half of the year.

“We now have an overflow factory that works for us,” Felicia said. The company has outsourced \$2 million of work this year.

All of this is during a time when small furniture makers have virtually disappeared from the market. Six years ago, the U.S. furniture market was the biggest in the world, Felicia said. Then China became a threat. Companies in China were able to make furniture more quickly and less expensively. Large companies, like Bassett and Thomasville, opened factories in China to take advantage of lower wages.

“We went through a really hard time,” Felicia said. Other small companies got out of the market, but the Marianis hung in there.

Several years later, their persistence paid off. Although prices on Chinese-made

furniture were lower, shipping times were long, and some customers complained about the quality. A port personnel strike on the West Coast delayed orders even further. Tariffs on bedroom furniture jacked up the low prices. Payment in advance was standard practice.

“Those upper-end buyers didn’t want to buy from China,” Felicia said. These customers looked for an American company to fill their orders, and many of them found Sorrentino & Mariani.

“If we’d gone to China, would we have been richer?” Rick asked. “Probably.” But he likes his business just the way it is.

“The whole China situation has really helped our company,” said Felicia. “I mean, we’re booming.” Today, the company supplies bedroom furniture to large hotels, like the historic French Market Inn in New Orleans, the Cornhusker Inn in Nebraska, and the Hyatt Regency Savannah.

As it is, growth has been the couple’s biggest worry. The Marianis give Hank Brown, the company’s plant manager, a lot of credit.

“As we’ve tried to grow, we’ve tried to do it smart,” Brown said. Last year, the company had 30 employees. This year, it has 72 people on payroll.

“We double every year,” Brown said.

The key is a blend of automation and individual craftsmanship. Using a CAD-operated system, furniture designers draw up plans for the pieces. Customers have the option of choosing from one of the company’s lines or having the pieces custom-designed.

Once the designs are finalized, the CAD system sends them out to automated routers. It takes two workers to cut a headboard, tabletop or cabinet panel in a matter of moments.

“When I started in the business, that would have taken me an hour to do,” Rick said.

Safety is of utmost concern with the machines. Step on a mat in front of the router, and the machine stops automatically, preventing anyone from being too close while the cuts are being made.

Molding and turnings – for legs and bed spindles – are purchased readymade.

“One of the things we do is keep other businesses around the country up and running,” Rick said. “I don’t do legs. I do furniture.”

The company does use dovetail joints – a sign of high quality. The pieces are assembled by hand, and then sent through the sanding process, first by machine and then by hand. Workers inspect each piece before it is sent to the finishing process, working out the rough spots with sanding blocks.

Finish is how the pieces really shine.

“We’re going to give the customer whatever finish they want in five steps,” Brown said. Five finish boxes allow for quick work with sprayers, once with a sealer that prevents moisture damage, a problem for hotel furniture.

The pieces have a five-year warranty, a high standard for commercial-use manufactured furniture, Brown said. Most customers replace their furniture every four to eight years.

Hotels aren’t the only Sorrentino & Mariani customers. “We do a lot of work for the government,” Felicia said. The company provides bedroom furniture for Air Force temporary living facilities, bachelors’ quarters and officers’ quarters around the world. The Marianis are hoping to work with the Army and Navy next.

The next step, however, is finding additional storage, since their warehouse has now become additional workshop space.

“We need more space, if we keep doing what we’re doing,” Rick said.



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