

The Class of 2009

Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame Announces Its Latest Additions

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

Tom Goodrow knew the day would come — he just didn't know when.

Since Springfield Technical Community College started erecting plaques in the Scibelli Enterprise Center connoting inductees to its Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame in 2000, Goodrow knew that the college would eventually run out of wall space in the facility's main lobby.

That day came last year, and thus members of the class of 2008 are immortalized on the SEC's second floor, where there is "all kinds of wall space," said Goodrow, the college's vice president of Economic and Business Development. Perhaps, but there will be considerably less when the large, diverse Class of '09 — the hall's 10th class — is inducted this fall.

This is a class that includes several sectors within the local business community — from manufacturing to the media — and also reflects the region's strong heritage of entrepreneurship and family-owned businesses. The inductees are:

- The Springfield-based law firm **Bacon Wilson;**

- The **Cambi family**, long-time owners of Springfield Foodservice, which was eventually sold to Performance Food Group;

- **Larry DeRose**, founder of Texcel, LLC, a leading manufacturer of medical devices;

- The **Desrosiers family**, three generations of which have managed Hadley Printing, now based in Holyoke;

- **John Gormally**, founder of *BusinessWest* and now also the owner of ABC40 and FOX6; and

- The **Peters family**, which founded and still manages Universal Plastics in Holyoke.

"This an excellent class of inductees, one that shows the depth of the region's economy and also how it has evolved over the years into areas such as plastics manufacturing and medical-device making," said Goodrow. "There are some wonderful success stories here."

They will be retold at the hall of fame's annual induction banquet, slated for Oct. 8 at the Log Cabin Banquet & Meeting House. Proceeds from the event, which have averaged \$50,000 the past several several years, go toward student entrepreneurship programs, including the YES (Young Entrepreneurial



Staff Photo

Scholars) program, which introduces area high-school students to the concept of entrepreneurship.

What follows are snapshots of this year's inductees.

Bacon Wilson

As Gary Fialky remembers it, there was no real strategic-plan-drafting activity, no organizational retreat with a heavy agenda and call to action, and no formal boardroom votes. "We didn't even hire a consultant," he told *BusinessWest*.

Instead, there was simply an agreement, or consensus, if you will, among the principals at Bacon Wilson to become a 'regional law firm.'

That's not a technical term within the legal industry, but rather the descriptor those at Bacon Wilson employ when referring to the way the firm has evolved over the past decade and expanded well beyond its Springfield roots (which go back 114 years) and into other communities in Western Mass.

And it hasn't done so by simply adding some mailing addresses in Westfield, Northampton, and Amherst, said Fialky, a

Senior partners at Bacon Wilson: from left, Steve Krevalin, Paul Salvage, and Gary Fialky.

senior partner and one of the lead architects of the firm in its present form. Rather, it has done so by merging with firms that are like-minded, especially with regard to community involvement, and, in a word, being *entrepreneurial*.

"The decision to become the first truly regional law firm in Western Mass. was made several years ago," Fialky explained, noting that, through these mergers and organic growth, Bacon Wilson has effectively doubled in size this decade, from 20 lawyers to 39. "But the methodology had to be planned out; using satellite offices just doesn't work. We decided that the way to become a regional law firm was to merge with firms in different areas that would professionally and geographically complement our firm."

As he talked about how this profound growth has taken place, Fialky first flashed back to 1979, when the firms started by

George Bacon and Peter Wilson came together.

Bacon started his law practice in 1895, focusing on corporate and business law. As that practice flourished, he ventured into politics, and continued to be active in local and state government for many years. He also became heavily involved in the community, thus setting a tone that continues today. Bacon's firm, which consisted of three partners for most of its first 70 years, began to expand with the addition of Paul Salvage in 1966, and Michael Katz and Gary Fialky in the mid-'70s.

Wilson, meanwhile, took over a firm in 1945 and built a thriving real-estate and probate practice. George Keady joined the venture in the early '50s, and Michael Ratner came on board in 1966. Wilson eventually retired, and Keady was named a superior court judge, leaving Ratner and several associates at the Wilson firm. In 1979, the two entities came together in a long-named venture called Bacon, Wilson, Ratner, Cohen, Salvage, Fialky & Fitzgerald, P.C., and over the years it has grown into one of the largest and most prominent firms in the region.

Bacon Wilson has been entrepreneurial in nature from the start, said Fialky, noting that, in the early '80s, the firm acquired the Ellis Title Co., which had the largest back-title base in the region, thus giving it diversity and a solid revenue stream. Over the years, the firm grew in both size and the scope of its services, developing specialties in corporate and business work, litigation, estate planning, real estate and probate, bankruptcy, and other areas.

And earlier this decade, the firm began expanding geographically, starting in Westfield with a merger with the firm Sharoff & Smith. The growth pattern continued in 2005 when Bacon & Wilson merged with Morse & Sacks, a Northampton firm started 104 years earlier, and again in 2008, when it merged with Monsein, Monsein & MacConnell in Amherst.

Fialky attributed the recent success and continued growth of the firm to that entrepreneurial character he described, but also some aggressive, leading-edge marketing, the use of technology to better serve and communicate with clients, and a strong commitment to the communities it serves.

"Our expansion activities have just evolved, really," he told *BusinessWest*. "We've taken advantage of some opportunities as they've presented themselves. In each case, we found the right fit, in terms of philosophy, personnel, and approach to serving clients."

The Cambi Family/Springfield Foodservice Corp.

Joe Cambi calls it the 'eating-away-from-home' industry.

That's the term used within the huge food-distribution business to describe the market targeted by those who distribute food and food-preparation items that are, as the phrase implies, *not* bound for the home.

Georgio Cambi set his sights on this market — or a small slice of it, to be more precise — when he acquired Springfield-based Frank's Distribution in 1969 and started delivering food and supplies to pizza shops and small Italian restaurants. Later, with a huge assist from his son, Joe, Cambi started expanding the client base to include larger restaurants, hotels, hospitals, nursing homes, and other facilities, all within that eat-out-side-the-home market.

And it was under Joe Cambi's leadership that the company changed its name to Springfield Foodservice Corp., continued to expand the client base — "we delivered to everyone from the local Bickford's to the Four Seasons restaurant," said Joe — and broadened its geographic footprint to all the New England states, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and beyond.

In the process of doing so, the company enjoyed explosive growth — roughly 30% a year on average for a 15-year stretch — and eventually reached \$150 million in annual sales before being sold by Joe Cambi to industry giant Sysco in 2001.

"They made me an offer I just couldn't refuse; it's as simple as that," he told *BusinessWest* before recounting the events that led to that offer being put on the table.

The story starts with Frank's Distributors, the small outfit located on Lyman Street in downtown Springfield that Georgio Cambi acquired from Frank Zucco and Frank Adoletti. That operation had been supplying items to small grocery stores, said Joe Cambi, but those entities were being replaced by larger stores supplied by giant distribution companies that Frank's simply couldn't compete with.

So the elder Cambi set his sights on pizza shops, small restaurants, and the few dozen or so items they needed, and fared well, said Joe, who eventually joined the family business after earning a business degree from Babson and cutting his teeth in the food-service business at Sysco, where he learned the many ins and outs of the eating-away-from-home market.

He took that experience, as well as the

strong belief that Frank's could and should greatly expand its scope, back to Springfield in 1983, and collaborated with his father to take the company in new directions and to heights they probably could not have dreamed of, from 12 employees and \$1 million in sales to 300 employees and more than \$150 million in sales.

"I realized that the company could be expanded to include full-service restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, chains, hotels, country clubs, and more," he said, noting that his father's venture did some work with such entities, but not much — a pattern he wanted to change. "I was of the Sysco ilk, meaning that I wanted all of your business — I wanted this to be a one-stop shop.

"Which meant that I had to invest heavily in products, because I couldn't just supply pizza sauce," he continued. "I had to sell them napkins and cleaning supplies, and meats, and everything else."

The younger Cambi succeeded in raising capital and putting it to work. The company, now named Springfield Foodservice, effectively doubled in size during each of the next several years.

Cambi said there were a number of factors that contributed to the company's success — including the profound growth of the eat-away-from-home market itself — but he attributed it mostly to an entrepreneurial attitude that prevailed across the company and was fueled in part by a policy to incentivize employees at all levels.

"We paid people on performance," he explained. "Instead of paying drivers by the hour, we paid them by the miles driven, the number of stops, and the number of pieces delivered. As a result, we had drivers fighting for the big loads. With our competitors, the drivers wanted the easy routes; our drivers wanted the hard routes. Everyone was a salesperson, and everyone was focused on growth."

That's food for thought, or, in this case, foodservice for thought.

Larry Derose/Texcel

"An incredible journey."

That's how Larry Derose described the past 22 years of evolution and growth at East Longmeadow-based Texcel, during which Derose's original vision for a company specializing in the production of medical devices and components has become reality.

To be more specific, the company has become a 'partner' — a term Derose would use often — for early-stage medical-device companies trying to bring new products,

mostly implantable devices, or neurostimulators, to the marketplace.

This vision is one that Derose originally crafted for a company called EBTEC Corp., an Agawam-based startup he co-founded and eventually sold to a British group. Derose put together a business plan to diversify EBTEC from a contract manufacturer focused almost exclusively on the aerospace sector into one specializing in medical devices. But the new owners didn't want to take that route, so Derose started a new venture and started down that path himself.

It's been a long journey — "it's taken 20 years to get here" — and it's far from over. But the company is now doing what Derose could only hope it would when he created it. And that is not to simply manufacture intricate parts and devices for the health care sector, but to become the partner of choice for the companies that conceptualize such products to essentially change the lives of people suffering from everything from high blood pressure to diabetes; hearing loss to obesity.

"It's just a fantastic field to be involved with," he said. "We've been very fortunate to be selected by a number of these new companies; they place great responsibility on us, and they have great expectations that we will act in a manner that's consistent with what they expect if they were allowed to create these same resources."

Backing up 22 years, Derose said that, after the new owners of EBTEC diplomatically turned down his diversification strategy, he walked away from a lengthy and lucrative continuity package to start a new venture directed by that aforementioned business plan, but limited by a non-compete agreement he called "the price of freedom."

At the start, Texcel was what Derose called a "multi-purpose laser-services company" that produced systems for a number of sectors, including, but to a limited degree, the medical field. And it was while doing such work that Derose said he fell in love with the medical-device industry.

"In the early stages, we were building very expensive capital equipment for some of the medical-device companies when they began to adopt lasers as the method of sealing implantable devices," he explained. "I got to be a witness to how these companies were producing these products, and we just got caught up with the growth of that industry."

Gradually, these companies expressed interest in having Texcel do some sub-assembly work for them, and the company became accepted as a supplier. This prompted physical expansion and recruitment of world-class

specialists in the field, he continued, adding that both steps were necessary in the process of becoming accepted by the medical-device community.

"They looked upon our firm as an extension of their firm," Derose explained, adding that today, Texcel does 98% of its work in the medical field. And while changing its client base, the company has also expanded its portfolio of services, adding early-stage design, electronics assembly, clean-room assembly, and more.

The venture-capital community that is funding the medical-device start-ups is telling such companies to essentially partner with companies that provide such services to reduce their overhead, Derose continued, adding that this trend has led to exciting growth opportunities for Texcel, most of them in the field of neurostimulators.

"These devices sense a condition and send an electrical signal to some critical nerve to change an outcome," he explained, listing the ability to control hunger and thus fight obesity as just one example. "These are life-changing therapies, and we're phenomenally fortunate to have the opportunity to work with incredibly bright people on these fascinating therapies; this is a great place to be."

As he said, it's been an incredible journey — and it's really just getting started.

The Desrosiers Family/Hadley Printing

Greg Desrosiers says the commercial-printing industry has changed considerably since his grandfather, a long-time linotype operator with the *Springfield Republican*, took an entrepreneurial gambit and acquired Hadley Printing at a bankruptcy auction in 1944.

"Everything is different ... technology has simply revolutionized this business," said Desrosiers, noting quickly that what *hasn't* changed is how the Desrosiers family does business. Elaborating, he said that he and his brother, Chris, who now manage the company, stress the need for steady, controlled growth, putting capital back into the operation on a consistent basis, and staying on the cutting edge of rapidly advancing technology.

This is the philosophy that Alexander Desrosiers brought to his business venture 65 years ago and passed on to the second generation, which, in turn, conveyed it to the third. Today, that mindset is helping Hadley Printing enjoy continued growth at a time of stern competition and difficult economic conditions, and also take a leadership position in the ongoing, industry-wide process of

'going green.' Indeed, one of the company's recent marketing campaigns featured the tag line "as green as it gets."

Tracing the history of their company, Chris, Greg, and their father, Mark, said Hadley Printing has been part of the local business landscape since 1896. It had fallen on some hard times by the mid-'40s, and eventually was forced into bankruptcy. Mark Desrosiers said his father saw a small ad announcing the sale of the venture and decided to take a chance on the one-person, South Hadley Falls-based operation.

"My father was always entrepreneurial, going all the way back to his paper route," said Mark. "His family came down from Canada, and everyone in the family worked in the railroad business — except him; he wanted something else."

And found it in printing. He eventually grew the small company and moved it to a bigger location in South Hadley, where it stayed until 1976, when the operation was moved to its current home on Canal Street in Holyoke in a former silk factory. The company was eventually passed down to the second generation of the family — which included brothers Mark, Alan, and Dean, with the latter two selling their shares within the past decade.

Greg and Chris Desrosiers both worked at the plant during summer breaks and part-time when school was in session. Greg attended Fordham, majored in Finance, and quickly discovered he didn't like that field. He segued into sales, and eventually returned to the family business. Chris, meanwhile, took a more-direct route. He graduated from a graphic arts program at Springfield Technical Community College and then earned a bachelor's degree from the School of Printing Management at the Rochester Institute of Technology. After working at a Boston printing firm for several years earlier this decade, he saw an opportunity to join the family business when his uncle, Dean, expressed interest in selling his share of the business, and took full advantage of it.

Today, Greg and Chris split duties, with the former leading sales and the latter directing operations. Together, they've formalized a strategic plan that includes investments in new technology (a 40-inch, six-color printer was the latest acquisition, thus enabling the company to take on a wider array of jobs), expansion of the bindery operation (an ongoing project), and a company-wide 'green' focus, which includes Forest Stewardship Council certification.

"Technology changes so quickly in this

business that, if you're not staying on top of the trends, then you're not going to be competitive," said Chris. "We've been able to grow this business through sales, and by making the right decisions on how and when to grow.

"Greg and I are very much about controlled growth," he continued. "We take one thing at a time, and we've been able to grow sales each year. That's smart growth."

And that's been the strategy since 1944.

John Gormally/BusinessWest; The Healthcare News; ABC40/FOX6

John Gormally says he's always been intrigued by the media — he was a disc jockey in high school on WAIC — and he's always been entrepreneurial; since age 18, he's essentially been working for himself.

These two character traits have collided to produce one of the most compelling business success stories in the region — what amounts to a media enterprise that Gormally has created over the past 25 years.

It started with this magazine, or what was known in 1984 as the *Western Mass. Business Journal*, a publication that has grown in size and scope over the past quarter-century, and continued in 2000 with the addition of a second publication, *The Healthcare News*. In 2007, Gormally ventured into broadcasting with the acquisition of ABC40 and the addition soon thereafter of a FOX affiliate in Springfield.

None of these ventures has been easy, but if there's one thing Gormally says he learned from managing a business publication and being a serial entrepreneur, it's that being in business isn't *supposed* to be easy.

"If it was, everyone would do it, and everyone would succeed," he said, "and we all know that the reality is much different."

Recalling the sequence of events that led to the creation of the *Western Mass. Business Journal*, Gormally said it started when he saw a monthly business publication in New Haven. "I said to myself, 'if they have one, then we should have one here, too.'"

Then just 23 and looking for a new challenge after a quasi-successful direct-mail venture, he put together a four-page mock-up of what the magazine would look like and took it to dozens of area business owners. Enough of them bought into the concept — and also pre-paid for advertisements — to give him the capital he needed to get off the ground.

In the beginning, said Gormally, he wore almost all the hats. "It was virtually a one-man show; I did paste-up, the graphic design, some writing, editing, sales ... everything."

Only a few years after getting started,

Gormally was confronted with a deep, prolonged recession (something similar to what has also happened with his foray into local television) and struggled to survive it. "It probably took me 10 years to get the magazine where I wanted to take it," he said, adding that this determination and persistence has helped both publications continue to grow and cultivate their niches.

"Quality has always been the hallmark of *BusinessWest* and *The Healthcare News*, and that's what sustains them today," he explained. "It's that quality — in the writing, story selection, and design — that sets them apart."

While leading the growth of the publications, Gormally continued to scan the local media market for additional opportunities, especially in television. "I looked at a number of low-power and full-power stations in the area with an eye toward branching out from the print media."

ABC40 wasn't officially for sale when he began talking with its then-owner, Sinclair Broadcasting, about acquiring the station, but it eventually became available, and in October 2007, Gormally brought the concept of local television ownership back to the Pioneer Valley.

It's a responsibility he says he takes very seriously.

"I'm a champion of this region, and I work hard to see that things get covered," he explained. "If someone calls or E-mails me with something, be it an event, a fund-raiser, or something happening in a local community, I'll talk with my news director about whether this is something we should cover. That doesn't happen with outside ownership; that owner is maybe thousands of miles away in another state."

Gormally has come a long way from spinning records at a small college radio station, but his mindset remains the same; he's still focused on the Valley, the media, and working for himself.

The Peters Family/ Universal Plastics

Joe Peters described his father, Jim, as a "mechanical genius."

A former flight engineer stationed at what was then Westover Air Force Base, the elder Peters, now deceased, later worked for Pratt & Whitney, and then for a fledgling plastics-fabricating company in Chicopee. In the mid-'60s, when he decided to go into business for himself in the emerging plastics field, Peters actually built some of the early machinery used to create plastic sheeting in a process

called vacuum forming.

A decade later, at the height of the energy crisis, he created a prototype for an early wind turbine, a device Peters called a 'wind-motor,' which featured giant, lollipop-shaped blades and was placed atop a 40-foot-high tower. "It never really got off the ground," said Joe Peters, adding quickly that this was one of his father's very rare failures when it came to innovation and business in general.

Indeed, he built his company, Universal Plastics, into an industry leader, and he did so by adopting a working attitude — and unofficial company motto — that is still in use today: "we accept the challenge."

"My father would never walk away from a potential project," said Peters, the second-generation president of Universal, who manages the now-Holyoke-based venture with his brothers, Richard and Mike. "If someone came in and said, 'I need a product to do this,' or 'I want it to function like this,' my father would find a way to make it happen — and we've kept that as our motto today."

This mindset has translated into steady growth for Universal, which started working predominantly for defense contractors before diversifying in a number of directions, and has also helped decorate some working spaces at the current plant. Walls and floors are crowded with a host of products, past and present, brought to the market through a sizable assist from Universal and its entrepreneurial approach to doing business.

For starters, there's the kayak, built for a Harvard, Mass.-based company, hanging in the front lobby — made from recycled detergent bottles. There are also bus-stop signs created for the city of New York, bathtub liners that remain in steady production, sleds for alpine slides, and housings for computers and a host of other technology-sector products.

Items too big for the walls include something called a 'nuclear accident personnel carrier' — "someone exposed to radiation could be put in it, allowing people to work on that individual without touching him," Peters explained — as well as the 'mosquito magnet,' a name that says it all, and housings for huge commercial and residential leaf blowers, among myriad others developed over the past 43 years.

Today, Universal carries on the tradition established by its founder, said Joe, adding that the company continues its policy of accepting all challenges, from both private- and public-sector clients. Joe serves as president, while Michael takes the title vice president of sales, and Richard serves as vice president of materials.

“Together, we’ve taken what was a very simple process back in the ’60s, and essentially brought it into the 21st century,” said Joe Peters. “We’ve expanded the business and the scope of our customer base, and we’ve also brought the equipment into the modern age — everything is computerized, and there are

a lot of robotic machines doing much of the work.”

Jim Peters passed away in 2003, but his legacy lives on at Universal. It’s evidenced by the way his son Joe talks about accepting stern challenges and helping constituencies ranging from the U.S. Navy to budding young

entrepreneurs trying to turn ideas into reality.

And it can also be seen on just about every wall in the plant.■

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