

Boasting Buffalo: Arthur Russ Jr. went from attorney to manufacturer



Buffalo Abrasives specializes in made-to-order grinding wheels and related products, sold into a variety of markets that include aerospace, construction, medical and others. Arthur Russ is the company president.

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It was Christmas 2012 when Arthur Russ Jr. was with his cousin, Jeffrey Binkley, who co-owned Buffalo Abrasives with several other cousins. Russ had a long career as a corporate attorney in Buffalo, then served as president of the Bar Association of Erie County for two years. After that he kept busy doing “retirement things” such as golfing and fixing small issues with his house. Brinkley said he didn’t like dealing with banks and insurance companies and asked for help. Russ told him, “I’ll give you a day a week if you give me some walking-around money.” Six months later, they bought out the other cousins (Binkley owns two-thirds of the company and Russ has the rest) and Russ was named president. He spoke to Business First about his winding career path and oversight of a midsized manufacturer in Niagara County.

You belong to the third generation of family ownership (Brinkley is a fourth-generation owner) of this company. How was it founded? My grandfather worked at Carborundum in Niagara Falls. They wanted him to be general manager, but he had five kids and he said, “I’ll do it if you let me hire my children when the time comes.” They said no. So he got an offer from a company called National Grinding Wheel near Hertel Avenue and Main Street (in Buffalo). He started as an employee in 1923 but ended up buying up the company’s stock. He moved it out to North Tonawanda and it’s been here ever since.

How did you get involved? I like to say I was born with a grinding wheel in my diaper. I worked there during high school and college but ended up going to law school (he graduated in 1967 from the University at Buffalo School of Law). My aunts and uncles sold the business in 1967. I practiced law in Buffalo for more than 40 years, basically serving family businesses. We had a boutique business firm in Buffalo – Albrecht Maguire Heffern & Gregg PC – that we merged with Phillips Lytle LLP in 2000. I worked for Phillips Lytle for 10 years until I retired, and then served as president of the Bar Association of Erie County in 2011 and 2012. Meanwhile, National Grinding Wheel decided to consolidate their operations to Salem, Illinois, in the 1980s and asked my cousins if they were interested in buying the company. Four of my cousins purchased that part of the business in 1988 and named it Buffalo Abrasives

How’s business doing now? Business is growing. We recently changed our sales structure with some new people and it’s gaining traction. We treat our employees well and we feel we have a very strong company culture here. We make an excellent, custom-made product and we focus on service. In the future we’re looking at incremental growth, one account at a time. We have a strategic plan and we’re executing on it.

What’s it like being a small manufacturing company in Western New York? I just went to a semiannual meeting of grinding wheel manufacturers and they’re all complaining about how they can’t get good people. They’re saying people don’t have the same work ethic as they used to and talking about drug issues. But what we’ve found is that there is still a really good quality of workforce in Western New York, and it’s a competitive advantage for us. To retain that quality workforce, we try to be very responsive to our employees. For instance, they came to us a few years ago and wanted to change the hours so they could start earlier in the summer and get out of work earlier. We figured out how to accommodate that and now we have people who come in at different times. It’s a family business mentality and culture.