

Biz Briefs

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Workshop means business for women

The Women's Business Development Center will host its Orientation and Business Development Assessment Workshop on Tuesday, Feb. 3, from 6 to 7:30 p.m., at 1315 Walnut St., Suite 1124. There is no charge to participate. Pre-registration is required. The workshop is for women interested in starting or growing a business. Visit www.womensbdc.org or call 215-790-WBDC. ••



Family business

COLIN M. LENTON / FOR THE STAR

Propper Bros. Furniture has been a staple in the Manayunk community since 1888. Starting as a family business, the commercial enterprise carries a variety of brand-name items, serving customers throughout the Delaware Valley.

By Jon Campisi
Star Staff Writer

There's a place on Main Street in Manayunk that conjures images of another time.

A time when people knew by name the folks they visited for their home-furnishing needs.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that today's workers at Propper Bros. guar-

antee that same friendly atmosphere that existed when the furniture store came into being in the late 19th century.

Propper Bros. opened in 1888, started by two Hungarian immigrants, brothers Samuel and Sigmund "Jake" Propper. The Philadelphia transplants began by selling their wares door to door, appealing specifically to their Manayunk neighbors.

At the time, the Propper family lived on the third floor of the building, while the business

was run out of the first and second floors, reflective of many of Manayunk's merchants in years past.

"They were always known for quality items at discounted prices," said Sam Kroungold, today the president of Propper Bros.

In the beginning, the two brothers focused on department store items. They survived the Great Depression and continued to sell quality products with a human touch.

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But post-World War II brought the advent of strip malls, or shopping centers, something that caused the brothers to refocus their business vision.

"Propper Brothers found that the department store model of their business was going by the wayside, since people were going to the larger stores, the strip centers," Kroungold said.

By the early 1950s, the brothers decided to focus strictly on furniture as their sole means of income. That continued throughout the 1960s and '70s, but things eventually took a turn with the loss of factory jobs in the community. Enter Manayunk's "downturn," as Kroungold calls it, a time when the neighborhood experienced economic hardships, leading many locals to forgo unnecessary items.

It was in 1972 when Kroungold joined the Propper Bros. team. Although things were looking grim during that period, the furniture store continued to flourish.

"We have built the business, and built a reputation as selling quality products at discounted prices," Kroungold said.

He entered the picture when the remaining Propper family member, Elmer Propper, was still aboard. Elmer stayed with the company until his retirement in 1980.

During those eight years, Kroungold learned much from Elmer, one of three sons who continued the family's business name.

Today, Propper Bros. offers a wide array of home furnishings, such as sofas, sleepers, recliners, family room furniture, bedroom items, dining room sets, accessories and much more. The business also offers design services and makes home visits.

"Anything from soup to nuts when it comes to furniture," Kroungold said. "You name it, Propper Bros. has it."

For years it was the sole furniture store on Manayunk's Main Street. But competition soon surfaced; two employees who got their start at the Manayunk staple eventually opened their own stores on Ridge Avenue in Roxborough. Today, there are about 10 to 15 stores selling home-related products in the Manayunk area.

"There is competition in Manayunk now because Manayunk has become a mecca," Kroungold conceded, noting that a number of stores sell "quality products and are offering exceptional services."



COLIN M. LENTON / FOR THE STAR

The main showroom at Propper Bros. displays a variety of furnishings and styles.

He likes to think that Propper Bros., which has about 15 employees, still claims an edge because of decades of customer service.

"We're not a big-box, cookie-cutter operation. We are, quite frankly, the antithesis of a big-box store," Kroungold said. "You come into Propper Bros. and you're treated like a human being."

That service, he insists, doesn't end when the customer leaves the store.

"They're buying a product that is going to last a long time," he said, "and they have certain high expectations that we must live up to."

Kroungold came to Propper Bros. fresh out of college, having studied finance, business, economics and psychology at Penn State University. During his schooling, Kroungold learned about what it takes to make it in the retail world.

"Sales is somewhat of an art, somewhat of a science," he said. "You don't just put someone on a sales floor and expect results. You need an individual who is a professional, who understands the art of listening, understands and knows the product cold, and someone

who exhibits interest in their customers' needs. We are not used-car salesmen. That's a whole different world."

Today, Propper Bros. caters to folks throughout the Delaware Valley. But the store also has customers beyond the region, in such areas as Delaware, the Jersey Shore and even Harrisburg.

"We have always marketed ourselves as a regional company, not just a local company providing products and services to the local market," Kroungold said.

As far as Propper Bros.' place in the local business community, Kroungold said if Manayunk were looked upon as an outdoor shopping mall, "you would look at Propper Bros. as being one of the anchor stores."

In addition to being a businessman, Kroungold sits on the board of the Manayunk Development Corp. Having that perspective, Kroungold knows firsthand the ups and downs when it comes to business.

"Business is always a challenge filled with peaks and valleys, and it's nearly a question of how severe the valleys are, and how high the peaks go," he said, making reference to today's difficult eco-

nomie climate. "Everything is cyclical, and we try to ride the tide when the peak time is here, and minimize the downtime when we're at the bottom of that curve."

Styles of products at Propper Bros. encompass what Kroungold calls "traditional, transitional and contemporary." The store, he said, is "more than capable of designing and featuring products for any room in the house."

Looking back on his career, Kroungold said he always knew he would be in the furniture business, but he didn't expect to spend so much time at one that started with modest means and became important for so long to local shoppers.

The challenge, day after day, is to keep that going.

"We listen to what they have to say," he said of customers. "Our success — stay the course." ••

Propper Bros. Furniture is at 115 Levering St. in Manayunk. For more information, call 215-483-0544 or visit www.propperbrothers.com

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