

EMPLOYER PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: ED SMITH
PRESIDENT, HARTMAN-WALSH PAINTING COMPANY

Dedication to the Craft

When he was ten years old, Ed Smith got his first taste of life as a painter when he worked at his grandfather's shop, E. Smith & Son in St. Louis, Missouri. In fact, Smith likes to say that being a painter is in his blood and often jokingly maintains that the fact that he loves the smell of turpentine is proof of his claim. His love and dedication for the craft took him from being a third generation painter on the job site for father and grandfather to being president and co-owner of one of the largest industrial/commercial painting companies in the nation, Hartman-Walsh Painting Company.

However, the road to his being president of Hartman-Walsh was anything but typical for someone who worked his way up in life. For Smith, his journey would take some unexpected turns before enjoying the success of his company today.

Ed Smith was 14 years old and continuing his career as a painter by working for Hartman-Walsh in St. Louis. His grandfather had sold his own shop and began working for the company years before. He brought both his son and grandson along to continue the family tradition. Smith was a painter's helper and did all the odd jobs around the shop that a 14 year old could handle.

Just a couple of years later, Smith began working there full-time as a painter after his school classes during the day. By the time he turned 20, he had graduated high school, finished his union apprenticeship, increased his workload at the company and had begun a family. "Looking back on it, it seems like we had to grow up a lot more quickly in those days compared to kids that age today," Smith said. He quickly added with a smile, "I'm not saying that's a good or bad thing, just that it was different then."

For Smith, life was good. He was living what many would call the American dream; a job that he liked and union wages upon which he could support his family. He also considered himself lucky to continue the family tradition in a craft for which he was born. Yet, in 1965, one day on the job site would change his life forever.

"I was working on a tank, and slipped and fell," Smith recounted almost matter-of-factly as he talked about that day. But Smith suffered a serious spinal cord injury and lost the use of his legs. Suddenly, the career he had come to love now seemed to come to an end.



Yet, Smith wasn't deterred by his injury. "I had my wife Judy who has always stuck by me and our one year old daughter Cindy to think about." After three years of intensive rehabilitation, he enrolled in the University of Missouri to earn a degree in mechanical engineering. Four years later, he had his degree and a job offer. "A small engineering firm in the St. Louis area hired me on to perform some architectural design," Smith said. "I began to work my way up at the firm. I was making my way and doing well, but I was bored to death," he admitted.

Being a painter was still in Smith's blood, and a life in front of a drafting board was difficult for him to adjust to.

"My dad, David Smith, sensing I was not happy with my new career arranged a meeting with Lowell Hartman, president and founder of Hartman-Walsh Painting Company. Mr. Hartman gave me the opportunity to get back into the business I knew and understood."

It wasn't long before Smith was the company's newest takeoff man, working with the blueprints and estimators on various company projects. Grateful to be back in the business he loved so much, he put the same resolve that got him through the aftermath of this accident towards his new job. "I made my mind up to be an asset to the company," he said. "I decided nothing was going to hold me back and was determined to find my place in the painting business."

His determination, talent and skill were recognized and he was soon promoted to become an estimator for the company. For the next ten years, Smith learned the business inside and out, including getting out on job sites. "I got out in the field where and when I could," said Smith while acknowledging the fact that being in a wheelchair presented obvious challenges on job sites. "I did it because it gave me a sense of reality, away from the plans, and made me a better estimator."

Ed Smith was now not only back in the business he loved, but also quickly becoming the company asset he aimed to be. That was proven when, in the early 1980's, a potential buyer approached the owners of Hartman-Walsh. "Mr. Hartman was in talks with another contractor who was interested in acquiring our company," said Smith. "After many discussions in brokering the deal, the interested buyers made it clear that they wanted me to remain on board if the deal went through because of my company and industry knowledge."

The deal did go through, and Smith and his new boss worked well together. Once again, Smith's commit-

ment to the company got him noticed and in 1990 he was named president and director of operations.

Yet, change would once again come to make a significant difference in Smith's life. "The owners wanted to pursue other interests and were discussing what they could do with the company," Smith said. "They considered liquidation, finding a buyer and other different business scenarios." The owners made a point of talking to Smith about what he thought. He told them he had his own idea for Hartman-Walsh. "When they talked to me about it, I told them that I wanted to keep the company going."

The owners and Smith agreed that all of them wanted Hartman-Walsh to remain open. There was too much history and too many people relying on the company for jobs to simply let it close its doors. However, everyone also agreed that it would be no small feat for Smith to become the company's newest owner. It would require the development of some financial backing and a business plan. Not surprisingly, that didn't slow Smith down or discourage him from making his dream happen.

"I recruited two partners into this deal," recalled Smith. "One, Ken Chism, already worked here. The other, Steve Chism, I knew by reputation only in the industry, but knew that he was just as crucial to making what we hoped for a reality."

Together, with his new partners and considerable counsel from those looking to sell the company, Ed Smith soon became one of the next proud co-owners and the newest president and CEO of Hartman-Walsh. Thinking back, Smith still gets excited about what they were able to accomplish. "We had a lot to learn about business, but we knew what we were doing when it came to painting, and we relied on that knowledge to make the right decisions."

Today, it's evident that Smith and his partners were fast learners on the business end of running Hartman-Walsh. The company is a leading industrial/commercial painting contractor in the United States and it is a major employer of IUPAT members in the United States. The company's work ranges from regular maintenance painting in 12 to 14 plants a year throughout the country, to larger projects such as power plants, dams and bridges, requiring a sound technical approach to deal with complex projects and tight schedules.

Smith attributes much of what the company is able to accomplish on those specialized projects to the IUPAT training his crews receive. "Our industry has evolved into a much more disciplined one due to strict environmental and OSHA regulations," said Smith. "The technology and equipment continue to advance and elevate the industry to a more professional level. I would urge everyone interested in their own future to take full advantage of the opportunity to gain knowledge



through IUPAT training. This will go a long way to keep you safe on the jobsite and ensure your future."

What advice does he have for the painter or other craftsman or woman out there considering making a move to start a company? "It's not an easy business and can be a risky venture, so go in with your eyes open. Surround yourself with good people who are willing to work hard and can learn. And never stop educating yourself. From there it's about service and earning the confidence of your customers. But, if you do a good job and put your best effort forward every time, it'll be tough to stay a small company." And that's a very good problem to have.

To learn more about Hartman-Walsh, visit its web site at www.HartmanWalsh.com.

