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Todd Sternfeld

Owner

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Don't fence **Todd Sternfeld** in! The **Superior Concrete Products** owner thrives on busting through barriers in tried-and-untested areas, such as when he introduced – then sold – precast concrete fencing and paneling to a skeptical U.S. market.

Were you the type of kid that liked to build and construct things and solve problems?

I always enjoyed drafting and building things.

One of my grandfathers owned apartments, and he would take me around and show me the buildings and people moving in and out. My other grandfather was in the tool business, and he went out and sold tools to farmers and different businesses. My dad was a sales manager in the clothing business who traveled a lot, so traveling has never been an issue for me. I was born in Los Angeles and fortunate to grow up around my family who were very, very hard workers and who had a lot of influence on me. They instilled that in me.

I was more interested in building things and doing things as opposed to academics!

I enjoyed being outdoors. I was 16 when I went into the landscaping business; I used to work with a friend of mine in the summertime. I was 19 when I went into the precast business; we had met some people who were trying to bring over the precast concrete post and panel concrete fencing from another country.

My dad, Earl, likes to tell the story that when I was 19, he told me that he was going to invest a little money in my business since I wasn't going to college. To this day, he still gets to reap the rewards of that subsidy!

Explain how you started the business.

I started the business in Los Angeles 1981. In the beginning, I was just kind of on an adventure and this was all new to me. A tremendous amount of learning took place over time because this is such a unique concept; there's a huge block wall market in Southern California and, of course, as I got more involved with the business we realized there are certain segments of the country where it was

predominantly block walls or predominantly brick. It was to the point that I was pioneering something completely foreign to people, and had to overcome [people's doubt].

What do you mean?

People in the construction industry had been putting up block walls their entire career and all of a sudden I was asking them to put up something they didn't know that had no credibility.

I got it off the ground in '81, '82 and then in '83 we decided we would go to the International Home Builders Show in Houston to market the product and see the reaction from builders. That was the first time I visited Texas and people were just blown away by the product. Brick fences are used so much here and of course our product was going to be so much less expensive. They don't put block walls up in Texas!

Over the years, I've learned every area of the United States has its own architectural standards. We decided we needed to come up with a better design that would fit different areas and markets of the country.

How did you go about doing that?

We decided to franchise or license the concept in Texas and couldn't get anyone to run with it. In '86, the S&L crisis hit. The late '80s was a really difficult time in Texas.

Lo and behold, right before the savings and loan crisis hit, I decided to move to Texas because we couldn't find anyone to get involved with it.

I sold a job in Irving for a customer I met at one of the shows. That got me over here, and we set up a small shift operation on a Redi-Mix plant. We started marketing the product to the cities, because I found out there were a lot of cities that had requirements for a masonry wall between commercial and residential zones and around subdivisions.

I started calling on the developers like we did in California and then we brought more product lines out. People out here want the brick look so we came up with a custom brick design, the rail fencing and then the stone pattern.

It sounds like things were moving along nicely.

In '96 I bought the Texas company from my partner and I started to rebrand the product and develop some new product to add to the existing ones that we had.

Then I went to the manufacturing plant I established in Cleburne. Being here in Texas has allowed us the ability to continue to market the product nationally and internationally.

I've developed nine product lines over the last 32 years and I continue developing new products.

It's exciting to come out with and have people see our new products and the fact that we're an established company gives it credibility.



California-born Todd Sternfeld enjoys making his good fences for his good neighbors in Texas.

Do you have plans to grow the business?

I would like to expand the business further. At one time, I was considering looking at another facility in central California, because California is still a very big market; it's an agricultural area, but it's expensive to do business there. I want to get involved with other people who can help me grow the company further. I realize I'm only one person and can only do so much.

What is the secret to the longevity of your business?

We've weathered the difficult times with the economy but the thing that kept us in business and has kept our company moving is that we make the product and install it as opposed to just making the product and selling it to distributors or contractors. We're very customer service oriented so we try to meet what the customer wants.

Also, I have about 45 employees in the Eules plant and Cleburne office. I have people who have worked for me for more than 25 years, and they're all really good solid people.

I think it's important to keep the employees engaged in what is going on with the company. I recently remodeled the Eules office and basically retrofitted the whole office using our product and the last office that I did was mine. I felt it was important to make sure that I got everybody else taken care of first. I try to treat my employees the way I would want to be treated.

I try to treat people with Texas hospitality with a California twist!

How do you like to spend your time away from work?

I like to golf. I was always athletic; I played baseball in high school and junior college before I got involved with the business. My dad was athletic; he used to coach us when we were younger and he got us involved in golf.

When I was younger I would drive the golf carts for him, and on Sunday mornings I looked forward to spending that time with him.

I'm a member of the Timarron County Club and that's been good for a variety of reasons – good for business, good for relationships and good for the family. I kind of look at it as my playground!

Your dad is still reaping the benefits of his initial investment; has he ever worked with you?

My dad worked for me for a while in California. When I broke off with the guy I was in business with in 1996, my dad was retired and it gave him something to do, it was good for him.

It was interesting because he gave me money for the business but had not been involved until 16 years later, and all of a sudden I'm training my dad.

He wasn't technically savvy and didn't know a lot about construction so I kind of had to coach him along. He really enjoyed it though; he liked going to the trade shows and talking to the people. Unfortunately, he hasn't been in good health and hasn't been working.

Is he proud of all you have accomplished?

Recently, I took my mom and dad out to the plant and it had been 15 years since my mom had seen it; she didn't really remember what it was all about.

She cried and was very happy to see what I've done. She said, "I can't believe you've built such a good business!" It's nice that they're still alive to be able to see it and the progress I've made.

I'm very lucky because I enjoy what I do. I don't mind working where I work at, I enjoy the people I work with and I'm always making progress. It's turned out to be a very nice, successful business.

Superior Concrete Products engineers, designs, manufactures, customizes, constructs and installs concrete wall systems. – mjm