

Pointing Ahead

When Polish immigrant Joseph Gershon started Arrow Fabricare Services in 1914, he called his business “Gershon Tailors” as the young man had fostered a strong reputation in Kansas City, MO, for his exceptional skills with needle and thread.

However, when Joseph opted to change the name a little later, he placed the word “Arrow” in the title as it was an extremely popular shirt brand at the time. Joseph’s brother, a shirt salesman, had suggested the name and it just seemed to fit well.

Now, over 92 years later, the name is still a perfect match for its current owner, Bruce Gershon, the third generation of his family to helm the business. Just as an arrow points straight ahead, Bruce doesn’t like to focus his energies on the past. He prefers to point toward the future.

“I characterize myself as kind of a perfectionist,” he said. “I guess I get bored with everyday business. I have to always take on a new challenge so it is never boring around here.”

The company has certainly had its share of challenges over the years, especially since Bruce began working full time in 1974. At that time, the company had about a half dozen employees, most of whom were family members. A lot has changed since then.

“We had a major remodel of the original building in 1978,” Bruce noted. “We put a new front on it and we finished connecting the building to the cleaning plant. Back in the old days, the cleaning plant was in another building out back, across an alley. Half of that had been enclosed before I got here. The other half was enclosed in the ’78 remodel.”

Then, in 1979, the family bought a 7-Eleven building across the street that could be used for employee parking as the company grew.

In the following year, the Gershons added on a 2,400-sq.-ft. vault for storing furs. The business always seemed to need more and more space. It had certainly come a long way since Bruce was growing up around the plant with his father, Bob.

Bob Gershon returned from serving the U.S. Air Force in World War II in 1947 and began working immediately at the family business. Now, almost 60 years later, he has not slowed down; he still works with his son every day.

When Bob first assumed more of the day-to-day responsibilities, Arrow took in a lot more laundry and drycleaning work and cemented a reputation for great service and quality.

The family also developed a good reputation inside the industry, as well. In fact, Bruce’s uncle, Melvin, came up with a few important innovations that helped all drycleaners.

“My uncle actually invented two things in the time he was here in this plant,” Bruce said. “One of those things was the foam press pad. After a 17-year run with the patent, Qualitex bought that out.

“The other thing he had invented — that they really didn’t patent but was adopted and made widely used by

Cissell — was the electric thumb switch on a steam iron. It was an idea that my dad had from his time in the service working on airplanes. Back in those days, they had pedals on the floor to make the steam come out of the iron. My dad said to my uncle, ‘Why couldn’t we have a switch right on the iron that you could operate with your thumb?’ They rigged it up.”

Not long after, Melvin Gershon left Arrow to pursue a career in engineering. Bob, however, remained and eventually taught the business to Bruce, who has been continuously expanding

answers. Our customer service reps know how to talk to them intelligently about the jobs they bring.”

Quality is an attribute that the Gershon family has instilled in Arrow for a long time. These days, they can simply show customers their IFI Award of Excellence certification if they require proof of their abilities, but, not so long ago, the company relied more on word of mouth.

In fact, word of mouth helped the company attract a large share of celebrity customers, including Bill Cosby,

When Bruce finished the garment, he was asked to send it back overnight. Regis wanted to open it up live on the show. Bruce was pleased with the way it came out and the “grand opening” on the show became another dose of positive publicity.

“It was amazing,” he said. “You can’t put a price on that kind of exposure.”

Back in the early 1990s, Bruce got involved with another celebrity in a business venture that proved to be a daunting project.

“I got a phone call from a fellow that



Bruce Gershon

and remodeling the plant for the past 30 years.

In 1994, Arrow added about 4,000 sq. ft. of space to its distribution and check-in area to accommodate for its expanding retail routes.

A decade later, the company added another 6,300 sq. ft. to its leather and fur department. The Gershons also purchased Blanc Blume Fine French Laundry which now houses the fire restoration division of the company.

Overall, Arrow’s resources are divided into two buildings totalling over 44,000 sq. ft. in area. The company also has as many as 80 employees, depending on the season.

As for the services it offers, it’s difficult to find one in which Arrow does not specialize. The company provides leather and fur cleaning and repair, alterations, gown preservations, fire restoration, mail order cleaning and other unique and interesting services.

“We do cleaning and repair of turnout gear and bunker gear,” Bruce said. “You use special chemicals. A lot of the work that we get from the fire department is of a hazardous nature.

“You have to go through testing to be able to work on the Crosstech moisture barrier [in firefighter uniforms] because it is very essential to the performance of the turnout gear to protect firemen,” he added.

While Bruce admits all of the diversity can make the business “more interesting to operate,” he is quick to point out that the company’s focus remains simple.

“The emphasis today in our business is on quality,” he said. “We’re studying different ways to improve our quality and training. We want people to come to Arrow and feel like they are going to a place where they can get

Arnold Schwarzenegger, Maria Shriver, Warren Beatty, Cher, Judith Light, Ralph Lauren, and others.

There’s a lot of pressure that comes with working on expensive garments owned by a famous clientele — especially leather items — but Bruce just believes it’s all a part of his job.

“With leather cleaning, there’s no paint by numbers,” he explained. “The art of the job is to put that garment back the way it originally looked and felt. We’ve become known as the cleaners that will take on most any job.”

Some jobs can be more intimidating than others, as Bruce learned a few years ago when Joy Philbin stained a really fine and expensive leather jacket while filling in for Kathy Lee on her husband’s show, *Live with Regis and Kathy Lee*. A guest chef had prepared a cooking sauce to be used with left-overs, and, unfortunately, some spilled on Joy’s garment during the show.

When her secretary called around New York looking for a good leather cleaner, one name frequently popped up: Arrow.

“They Fed Ex’d the leather jacket to us,” Bruce said. “My father called and spoke to Joy and while he was speaking to her about the jacket, Regis got on. My dad engaged Regis in conversation and he just got a kick out of my dad, who is a schmoozer. The next day, on the show, Regis started talking about this leather jacket and his conversation with my dad.”

Things then kind of snowballed. Regis went on and on about the stained leather jacket and the cleaners who were trying to get it out. Meanwhile, a local network affiliate wanted to shadow Bruce as he cleaned the famous garment. It became an ongoing media spectacle.

worked at Polo Ralph Lauren,” he said. “He had worked in their care area and got promoted to a six-member design team for a project that Ralph wanted — producing a vintage clothing line called Double RL (RRL).”

For a span of a year and a half, Arrow stayed open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, working on ways to make brand new blue jeans and other accessories look like old clothing.

“We actually did the production here,” Bruce noted. “The design team came up with the idea of introducing wood stain into the petroleum solvent to come up with a look that was very authentic and vintage.

“We did nearly half a million pair of blue jeans all at our plant. We did gloves. We did shirts, all kinds of things. We tried so many crazy different things to leather. It was an overwhelming project.”

The clothing line is no longer around today, but Bruce has found plenty of new challenges to keep him busy and his company on the cutting edge.

Arrow Fabricare Services earned a prestigious “2005 Cornerstone Award” for their impressive expansion efforts a couple of years ago. American Drycleaner also honored them with a Special Honor for Best Renovation in the magazine’s 2005 Plant Design Awards.

More changes occurred recently when Bruce had a Metal Progetti system installed. With such technology, the plant’s efficiency has been amazing.

“I fell in love with the concept of having the ability to permanently mark in our customers’ clothing with a tiny little unobtrusive bar code,” he said.

With each improvement, it only makes it easier for Bruce to keep pointing his company toward the future.

“I’ve been down that road now,” he said. “I can’t ever imagine going back.”