

Arrow Fabricare Services Turns 100

Reaching the century mark in business is no easy feat. Arrow Fabricare Services, Kansas City, Mo., certainly has reason to celebrate its 2014 centennial, which it plans to do in style with current, former and retired employees in December.

Polish immigrant Joseph Gershon planned to call his new business “Gershon Tailors,” but his cousin suggested “Arrow,” like popular shirts sold during the time. The name remains a perfect match for current owner Bruce Gershon, the third generation of his family to helm the business.

“Dad (Bob Gershon) and Grandpa (Joseph Gershon) always stressed doing a good job and doing it the right way,” says Bruce. “That’s one of the main reasons we’re still in business today.”

ON TARGET. Joseph Gershon married and raised a family in Kansas City. His business grew through the 1920s and ’30s. Son Melvin worked alongside his father, and then son Bob returned from World War II in 1947. It was around that time that Joseph decided to bring dry cleaning in-house.



Bruce Gershon

Bob was hands-on, running deliveries, pressing clothing and growing the family business, which eventually earned the title “Kansas City’s Exclusive Specialty Cleaners.” Arrow also developed a solid reputation among dry cleaners, thanks in part to some innovations developed by Melvin.

“My uncle Mel actually invented two things in the time he was here in this plant,” says Bruce Gershon. “One of those things was the foam press pad, which is still used in many dry cleaners even today, and after a 17-year run with the patent, Qualitex bought that out.”

The other invention, which he didn’t patent but was adopted and made widely popular by Cissell, was the electric thumb switch on a steam iron.

When Melvin left Arrow to pursue a career in engineering, Bob remained and assumed more day-to-day responsibilities. ▶



Arrow Fabricare Services' headquarters in Kansas City, Mo. (Photos: Arrow Fabricare Services)



This undated photo shows Bob Gershon in front and Melvin Gershon behind the truck.



Melvin Gershon and two women pose behind the counter in this 1947 photo.

In the mid-1950s, Bob and a partner jumped into the leather cleaning business.

Joseph died in February 1963. Bob persevered through the polyester and wash-and-wear craze of the 1960s that proved fatal to thousands of dry cleaners.

GROWING PAINS. The company has had its share of growing pains, especially since Bruce began working full-time in 1974. Arrow had some half-dozen employees then, half of whom were family members.

During a major remodeling project of the original building in 1978, a new front was erected and the building connected to the cleaning plant. The following year, the family bought a vacant store across the street to expand its fur cleaning business and accommodate employee parking. Next came a vault for fur storage.

In 1985, Arrow acquired its largest local competitor in the leather, fur and specialty cleaning business, bought two adjacent buildings to the south and expanded.

The company rebranded and began doing business as Arrow Fabricare Services, to emphasize its diversified services.

In 1994, it added 4,000 square feet of space to its distribution and check-in area to accommodate expanding retail routes.

In 2001, Bruce Gershon purchased Blanc Plume Fine French Laundry. This accommodated expansion of Arrow's fire restoration division, which moved into the north Kansas City facility and immediately doubled its volume.

When local officials approached Arrow about a plan to build a bus waiting station and early childhood development facility nearby, it meant the loss of 4,200 square feet of space plus employee parking, but the chance to expand to the north, add 6,300 square feet to the leather and fur department, and revamp its production flow. The new building opened in 2004.

In October 2010, the company acquired the drapery cleaning equipment from its retiring vendor and set up shop in Kansas City, Kan.

Arrow's resources are divided between two buildings totaling more than 48,000 square feet, and its workforce numbers approximately 80, depending on the season.

While Bruce Gershon admits Arrow's diversity can make the business "more challenging to operate," he is quick to point out the company's focus remains simple.

"The emphasis today in our business is on quality," he says. "We're constantly studying different ways to improve our quality and training, investing in our greatest resource, our people. We want our customers to come to Arrow and feel like they are going to a place where they can get answers."

And it's possible that a customer may even see Bob Gershon, now age 88, who still comes down to the business for a few hours each weekday morning. Continuity may also have something to do with Arrow's longevity. ○