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Rental and leasing firm keeps on trucking

DeCarolis Truck Rental CEO Paul DeCarolis leads the family-owned firm that began in the Depression

By KATHY QUINN THOMAS

In 1967, following personal losses that included the deaths of his father, mother and only brother, 26-year-old Paul DeCarolis needed legal advice. So DeCarolis, now the sole owner of his father's truck rental and leasing firm, asked a local banker for a lawyer referral. The banker introduced DeCarolis to attorney Samuel Merlo over lunch.

Merlo, with the firm Woods Oviatt Gilman LLP, and DeCarolis, now 60, have been friends ever since.

"Paul is an unusual person," Merlo says. "The way he dealt with all that tragedy was to just keep working through it."

DeCarolis Truck Rental Inc. began in the 1930s, during the Great Depression.

"My father, Louis, used to pick up workers in the city and drive them out to the farms to work for the day," DeCarolis says. "He then began bringing produce back to the city for processing."

In 1938, Louis DeCarolis formally named the firm DeCarolis Trucking Co. During the 1940s and 1950s, he opened a warehouse and truck stop on the city's west side where traveling truckers could rent parking and storage space.

The company later added a Diamond Reo and Thermo King refrigerated truck dealership. In 1961, when their father died, Paul and Louis Jr. took over the company. Following the business path their father hiked on, the duo sold plenty of trucks and added a storage trailer division to the company.

As top salesmen for Thermal King in 1966, the DeCarolis brothers won a trip to Japan. Paul and Louis flipped a coin to decide who would take the trip. Louis won. He died in a plane crash while on the vacation.

Stunned and grief stricken, Paul DeCarolis was left alone with the company.

"I took a look at the operations and it was too much for me to handle," DeCarolis says. "I divested myself of the dealerships and truck stops, and decided to concentrate strictly on rental and leasing."

Apparently a good decision: Now called DeCarolis Truck Rental Inc., the company has become one of the largest rental and leasing concerns in Upstate New York. The company has 200 workers and 3,000 vehicles at seven locations statewide, up from 19 employees in 1975.

DeCarolis would not disclose business specifics, including revenues, growth and explicit plans for the future.

The Geneva branch was the company's first foray outside the city limits in 1980. Since then DeCarolis branches have taken root in Henrietta, Syracuse, Buffalo, Binghamton and Perry, Wyoming County.

The firm's corporate offices are on Colfax Street, one mile away from where Louis DeCarolis opened his first truck stop at Mount Read and Emerson Street. The truck stop no longer is at this location.

Technology has been a hand-in-hand partner in the company's growth. With thousands of vehicles driving millions of miles, paper accounting became virtually impossible. With a computer department headed by DeCarolis' eldest son, Louis, all



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

DeCarolis: "I am always looking for a better balance between job and family. When you are an entrepreneur you have to work whatever time it takes to do the job. The days can run into one long day."

DeCarolis branches are connected by voice and data lines. The system tracks accounts receivable, human resource data and keeps track of each vehicle—its location, who has it and what needs to be serviced.

"Every day the demand keeps changing, the customer needs keep changing," DeCarolis says. "To go back to the old methods, I don't know how you could operate without computer systems anymore."

DeCarolis is not cavalier about competition. "It seems sometimes like everyone is our competitor," he says.

Along with the big national firms such as Ryder Systems Inc. and Penske Truck Leasing, truck dealerships and financial institutions now want a bigger share of the truck lease market.

"All of us can provide the same vehicle for practically the same price," he says. "What DeCarolis offers is service, service and better service. It's the service and the relationships we build that differentiate us from our competitors."

Marketing methods have evolved along with the growth at DeCarolis. Once upon a time word of mouth and the DeCarolis name

on every truck was sufficient to get the job done. Six years ago, DeCarolis hired a consultant to analyze the business and help put together a formal strategic plan.

DeCarolis now also uses direct mail, radio, television and industry publication advertising. The company has a Web site and an expanded outside sales force to keep the customers coming in.

As president and CEO, he spends more time now on strategy and planning, but sorely misses hands-on experience.

"Operations has a lot of pluses," he says. "You see things completed every day and when you go to bed, you feel you have accomplished something."

"With planning, it can be months down the road before you see any results."

DeCarolis calls himself "an operational guy." For many years, he ran all the departments in the company, acting as sales agent, washing and greasing the equipment and servicing tires at 2 a.m. to get a truck to a customer by 6 a.m.

Vincent DiSchino, now executive vice president at DeCarolis, initially was hired 31 years ago as its parts man. DeCarolis worked side by side with his employees until the company became too large for him to do so, DiSchino says.

"One thing Paul always kids about is that he's in charge of paper clips and paper towels," DiSchino says. "That is as basic and as important as anything else. He thinks that everybody should take that interest in the small things as well as the big things."

With little formal education, DeCarolis went to the schools of street smarts and hard knocks, he says.

"I have worked here my entire career, my entire life. As a kid, I did everything a kid does in a family business, from sweeping floors to cleaning floor drains," he says.

Always a west-sider, he attended Nazareth Academy when it was a boy's

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Close-up

Paul DeCarolis

Title: President and CEO of DeCarolis Truck Rental Inc.

Age: 60

Education: "Schools of street smarts and hard knocks"

Family: Wife, Annette; four adult children; three grandchildren

Quote: "What DeCarolis offers is service, service and better service. It's the service and the relationships we build that differentiate us from our competitors."

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school. He met and married his wife, Annette, at Most Precious Blood Church on Stenson Street. Although the family moved to Greece, the DeCarolises still attend services on Stenson Street every week.

"I am always looking for a better balance between job and family," he says. "When you are an entrepreneur you have to work whatever time it takes to do the job. The days can run into one long day."

DeCarolis has done as good a job as possible maintaining the balance, DiSchino says.

"Paul could work as many hours as he would be able to stay awake for during the week, but he always tries hard to keep weekends for the family," he adds.

With a family cottage on Canandaigua Lake, the DeCarolis family, which includes four adult children and three grandchildren, gets together on weekends in the summer.

"I do some boating, a little golf. I enjoy that," DeCarolis says.

DeCarolis is an active member of the Rochester Rotary Club, and is on the board of the Rochester Italian Charities and the Circus Saint and Sinners. He also is a Transportation Council board member of the Greater Rochester Metro Chamber of

Commerce Inc. and has received the organization's Executive of the Year and Distinguished Service awards.

Along with being a charter member and past chair of the board of Amtralease, a nationwide network of independent truck leasing companies, DeCarolis is director of the Truck Rental and Leasing Association, a non-profit trade association. He also is a member of the New York State Advisory Board of Liberty Mutual Insurance Co.

"His schedule has always been up early, work late," Merlo says. "Paul has the ability to move up and down social ladders, talking with mechanics and CEOs of multinational corporations, and he puts them all at ease. They all feel he is their friend."

DeCarolis is gentle, yet he is no pushover, DiSchino says.

"Let me just say his toughest sell is internal. When someone in the company has an idea, Paul will ask challenging, detailed questions," he says. "Sometimes the process reveals things, i's to dot and t's to cross. He always wants to make sure we're taking care of the customer."

DeCarolis also remembers that his name appears on each truck.

"It's my reputation and my integrity at

stake," DeCarolis says. "It is hard to let go of that sense of responsibility. But my growl is much worse than my bite."

Roughly 80 percent of DeCarolis' employees are technicians. With the current employment situation, it is increasingly difficult to find qualified workers, he says. "We want technicians who not only have the mechanical aptitude necessary but also the brainpower to handle the new technology."

Future growth will happen when it is time and not before, DeCarolis says.

"We've always taken the opportunities that were the best fit financially. We don't want to create any financial problems with growth. You have to be very careful not to rock your foundation," he says.

At 60, DeCarolis is not yet thinking of retiring.

"I was 50 for 25 years," he says, laughing. "I was a grown-up at a young age, negotiating with men twice my age for most of my life."

"When I actually turned 51, I realized time was actually passing. But I can't see stopping any time soon," he says. "I'll always have to have my fingers in something."

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