

Third-generation family business reflects on weathering Great Depression, WWII, Covid recession

By: *Justin Henry*

July 7, 2020 11:50 am



David Casher, third-generation owner and manager of Casher's Autobody Supply LLC, said expanding his business to include an aviation finish division provided a "life-line" during the COVID-19 pandemic. PHOTO/JUSTIN HENRY

David Casher was 13 years old when his grandfather, Harry Casher, founder of Harrisburg autobody and paint supply company Casher's Inc., put him to work in the shop on a part-time basis, organizing inventory. When he was old enough, he delivered products and mixed paint.

"As scared as you can be as a teenager having your grandfather looking over your shoulder, it was probably the best thing he ever did for me," said Casher, now owner and manager of the business, in an interview with the Central Penn Business Journal. "One of the things my grandfather told me was don't expect a pat on the back for doing your job, but you can expect a kick in the rear if I catch you screwing around."

When Casher took over ownership from his father three years ago, after more than two decades working full-time, he became the only family member employed at the business. However, he said his grandfather, who died in 2005, imparted to him the entrepreneurial ambition and leadership style that sustained the third-generation, family-owned business through the Great Depression, World War II, the 2008 Recession and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

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"Our story is truly a story of overcoming obstacles," Casher said. "My perspective with my employees is that we've been through catastrophic situations, and just as we survived World War II and 2008, we're going to find a way to survive this as well."

It all started in the 1930s, when a newly-wedded Harry Casher was recruited by his wife Sylvia's family for his charisma to be a salesman at their Allentown autobody repair and paint supply store. The store's paint manufacturer sought to expand westward to the Harrisburg market, but Harry's in-laws politely declined, maintaining their company for several decades before selling to a national chain.

Ambitious and undeterred, Harry and Sylvia relocated to Harrisburg and founded Casher's Inc. to service the midstate collision repair industry.

In 1941, history took a dramatic turn. The bombing of Pearl Harbor prompted the 23-year-old Harry to serve as a combat veteran in Okinawa, leaving his wife Sylvia to run the nascent business while raising two children on her own until he returned home from the war in 1946.



The country's supply chain had been upended, re-directed to support the war effort, and critical supplies such as metal and fuel were rationed. Wartime operations for Casher's meant mixing paint in baby-food jars and delivering products on bicycles, he said.

"I can't imagine — when we talk about the greatest generation — coming out of the Depression and being dropped in World War II, and not knowing if your husband is going to come home — that's a lot of heavy psychology," Casher said, reflecting on his business' entrepreneurial heritage.

Casher said the company's operations during the Second World War established an ethos of mutual respect between employer and employee, business and customer and business and vendor.

"It's how you treat people with integrity and honesty that builds value in who you are and who your family is and who your business is," Casher said. "It's who you surround yourself with and I think we've surrounded ourselves with a really good team of people here."

Casher's Inc., with a workforce of 15, many of whom are long-time employees, developed a conservative approach to cash management and an innovative eye to diversifying service offerings. All are qualities that allowed the company to brace for the COVID recession without furloughs or layoffs, Casher said.

The Great Recession of 2008 prompted Casher to set up a separate saving account for the business, which he's contributed to when finances have been made available.

"Over time I started squirreling away my own little rainy day fund," he said. "One of the things we do here is we have a pretty strong eye in terms of cash management and cash position with the bank. We're probably more conservative than the bank would expect."

When Casher's paint manufacturer began offering a line of finishes for aviation, Casher thought an aviation finish service "would be a really good diversification for the company." Casher's Aviation Finishes LLC, a division of Casher's Inc., started with no customers in 2006 but has since grown into a global business, covering the mid-Atlantic and New England, with a growing customer base in the European market.

"It's really become a global business," Casher said. "We have a customer in Canada, a customer in Brazil and we just completed a quote for a customer in India. We've shipped paint to southeast Asia and South Korea."

The coronavirus pandemic decreased demand for autobody services, with customers compelled to stay at home and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, he said. However, the company's aviation customers had more time and capital to seek aviation finish services.

"Over March, April and the second half of May, our aviation business was there to help keep the bills paid," Casher said. "It was definitely a lifeline, there's no question about that."

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