



Stylecraft Interiors Inc. still operates in the same building in which it started in 1951, and it is run by the second and third generations of the founding Reindl family. From left are Matthew, Eleanor, Fred and Mark Reindl.

# Three generations of cabinetmaking

Embracing new ideas early and adapting to change are hallmarks of this shop



Matthew Reindl of Stylecraft Interiors Inc. shows how the program he wrote works to quickly make all the machining calculations for a cabinet box. The program was written for the IBM PS2 controller mated to an Alberti point-to-point CNC machining center, one of the first machines that offered a PC controller, and it still runs that machine today.



While Fred Reindl is known for adopting new technologies early, sometimes the older methods are best, he says. Rather than use bending plywood, the shop kerfs conventional plywood to create round forms with more consistent contours.

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In these days of big furniture factories downsizing and relocating to save labor costs, there are many stories of displaced factory workers launching their own small shops. But that's an old story to one New York shop that has been in business

now for three generations.

Fred Reindl's father came to this country from Germany in 1930 and eventually became production foreman for Modern Age Furniture Co., then a major furniture manufacturer in New York City. But when that company decided it couldn't compete with lower labor costs of factories in North Carolina, Reindl's father launched Stylecraft Interiors Inc. in 1951 in Great Neck, N.Y. More than 50 years later, the business is still in the same location and is operated by the original founder's son and grandsons.

## Shop Snapshot

**Company:** Stylecraft Interiors Inc.

**Location:** Great Neck, N.Y.

**Founded:** 1951

**Proprietor:** Fred Reindl

**Primary products:** Custom cabinetry, architectural millwork, dental and medical offices

**Employees:** 9

**Annual sales:** \$1 million

**Shop size:** 4,500 square feet

**Key equipment:** Alberti CNC machining center, Ayen dowel inserter, SCM Z30 panel saw, SCM sliding table saw, Brandt KD84 edgebander, Ritter case clamp.

## Always adapting

Fred Reindl is quick to explain that today's Stylecraft is quite a different business from the one started by his father. Then, the emphasis was on finely crafted custom furniture to meet the tastes of upscale Long Island residents.

"My father was a European-trained cabinetmaker, tops in his trade," Reindl says. "He was good. I learned a lot from him. He said you

*continued*

# Three generations



Stylecraft purchased its SCM Z30 panel saw when the machine was the first such unit SCM offered with a computer controller.

**Operating in only 4,500 square feet, Stylecraft has to emphasize efficient use of space.**

have to have some sort of production or you can't make any money. He'd ask, "If you were doing 100 would you do it that way?"

His father brought Fred into the business, training him as a finisher.

## Competing in today's business climate

Just because Stylecraft Interiors Inc. has managed to stay in business for three generations does not guarantee that it will automatically be successful for a fourth. Fred Reindl, the second-generation owner, and his two sons, Matthew and Mark, are keenly aware that today's business climate presents fresh challenges.

The business is very different now compared to when his father started it, says Fred. "It's not as much fun now. It's much more difficult," he says. "We have a different clientele. There's a different labor market."

His wife, Eleanor, who comes in to help with the books a couple of times a week is particularly concerned about labor costs. "One person's health insurance today is costing more than a full shop did (in the 1970s)," she says. They are also concerned about an apparent trend in some shops to hire undocumented workers and cut back or eliminate benefits. "The legitimate shop subsidizes illegitimate shops," says Fred, referring to such programs as workers compensation that he, as a legitimate shop owner, must contribute to and that even undocumented workers may benefit from.

Matthew says the only way to compete today is to keep focused on a niche. "We cater to what dentists need," he says. "We design each facility differently." They pay attention to details such as left and right-handed work areas and getting the most out of tight spaces.

That extra effort has rewarded Stylecraft with a long list of repeat customers and referrals.

Today, the company only rarely does residential work, and the finishing skills Fred learned from his father are needed only once in a while. Stylecraft now specializes in sophisticated cabinetry for dental offices throughout the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Most of that work involves laminate and similar materials that require little or no finishing.

But Fred and his sons Matthew and Mark have brought new skills to the business, skills that didn't even exist when Fred's father started the company. Fred's fascination with emerging technology has led him to be an early adopter of new advances. But don't look for the absolute latest machine or gizmo in the Stylecraft shop. That's because once Fred and his sons embrace new technology, they tend to hang on to it until something significantly better is introduced.

### Optimizing on an Apple

Way back in the 1980s, Fred was intrigued by the advances being made with early personal computers. He was convinced these new machines could contribute to his cabinet shop if he could just figure out how. He played around with some of the early Radio Shack personal computers and learned to program. That work paid off in 1984, when he wrote an optimization program on an Apple II computer. The program was so successful that they still use it in the shop today.

"We have six or seven (spare Apple II computers) in the back," says Fred, explaining how they can keep using a program that requires obsolete equipment no longer supported by the manufacturer.

Matthew apparently picked up his father's interest in computers and actually went to school to become an electrical engineer, but he was attracted back into the family business by the challenge of integrating computer systems and cabinetmaking.

One early project involved writ-

ing a program for an IBM PS2 computer that was the controller for the Alberti point-to-point CNC machining center in the shop. The machine was one of the first of its kind to even have a PC station to allow programming at the machine, Fred says. And much like Fred's optimizing program, Matthew's program for the point-to-point is still in regular use.

Demonstrating the program, Matthew showed how entering just a few basic specifications allows the computer to calculate and modify parameters to make virtually any cabinet box required. That eliminates the need to even draw many jobs, Matthew says. "It's the small shop that needs computer setups on the machines," says Fred, explaining that saving setup time is much more important when it involves smaller production numbers.

### CAD for custom

But many of the stylish reception areas required for the dental offices Stylecraft works on today call for unusual curves and special features that don't neatly fit into the basic cabinet program. That's when Fred will draw what's needed in AutoCAD, but then they use their own programming skills to translate that into code for the CNC machine. Fred says they generally try to avoid drawing jobs because of the time it takes to draw everything. "We don't get paid to do that," he says.

Fred says that learning to program the computers has made him "sharper" and improved shop efficiency. "When you program, you have to think how do I do it," he explains.

When today's shops complain about the learning curve on new CNC installations, they've got nothing on the Reindls and their experience. When they bought the Alberti CNC machine in 1990, it was rare in the industry to have a PC interface at the machine. Because it was all so new, there were complications in getting it up and running. The machine was installed in



**This striking reception area with monitor installation is an example of the custom dental office cabinetry that is a specialty for Stylecraft. The company focuses on the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.**

November, but there was no post-processing software until March. Stylecraft agreed to be a beta tester for the software just so they could get it running faster.

### When to buy a machine

Having grown up in the shop and having adopted many of today's technologies years before they were mainstream, Fred has strong feelings about how to justify the purchase of equipment. He bought one of the earliest CNC machines to be run by a PC. He bought the first panel saw SCM made with a computer controller. When they bought their Brandt KD84 edgebander in 1994, they made sure it was capable of having a PC interface. Serious thought also went into the purchase of major conventional equipment such as the SCM sliding table saw and the Ritter case clamp.

When he considers buying a machine, Fred makes a list and calculates the time it would save. "We were suited for the point-to-point machine because we had a mix of production and custom work," he says. In calculating the potential savings, he says it was

a lot easier to figure the benefit in production work. He intended to eliminate two workbenches with the CNC machine. In working out the numbers, he compared the cost of a helper over five years to the cost of the \$100,000 machine.

But even with all of his careful calculations, he got a surprise. "What I didn't calculate was how beneficial it was in custom situations," says Fred. "It's actually more beneficial for custom than production," says Matthew.

"People think you have to run a CNC machine eight hours a day to make money," says Fred. "You don't."

### Fourth generation?

When Matthew was in high school, he would come into the shop on Saturdays to help glue up drawers. He continued to work in the shop when he went to college.

"He was not going to work here, and then he never left," laughs his mother, Eleanor.

Matthew says the challenge of incorporating computers and manufacturing in today's economy is what drives his interest. "Grandpa was a craftsman," he says. "We're not really cabinetmakers (the way he was). We try to make up for it with technology."

Matthew's father is now 64, but active as ever in the business. Neither Matthew, who is 37, nor his brother Mark, 33, are married, so there is yet to be a fourth generation of Reindls to be born. But it's a pretty good bet that there will be a busy shop waiting for them — along with some old Apple II computers — when they do come along. □

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