

SMALL BUSINESS

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Great Falls Tribune

Malisani family history cast in tile, stone

By NANCY SNOW
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Three generations of a Great Falls family have mastered the age-old craft of working with tile and marble.

Stone work by the Malisani graces buildings from the airport terminal at Great Falls International, to the Noxon Dam, Old Faithful Snow Lodge, Penn Station in Newark, N.J., and Great Falls High School.

Arthur Malisani and his brothers, who emigrated from Italy just a few years earlier, established the business in the early 1930s.

Malisani has died and his son and grandsons now run the business. Art Malisani Sr., Tony Malisani and Art Malisani Jr. share the duties of ownership, working with five seasonal full-time employees. Art Sr.'s wife, Dorothy, shares the office duties with Art Jr.'s wife René.

The company sells and installs ceramic and quarry tile and terrazzo for residential and commercial projects. Terrazzo is created by mixing marble chips with concrete, grinding it all down, then polishing it to a fine finish. The family's showroom at 1101 8th Ave. N. has more than 2,000 samples of ceramic and quarry tile on display.

Tile etching is another service they offer. Recently, they used a



Tribune photo by Stuart S. White

Third-generation artisans Art, right, and Tony Malisani operate a suction hoist and stone saw on a slab of marble at the family's business at 1101 8th Avenue North.

sandblaster to etch a theater logo into porcelain tile in front of the ticket counter at the new Carmike cineplex at Great Falls Marketplace.

Art Sr. worked at his father's business through high school, getting his union card at age 19. In the early '70s he bought out his father and incorporated in 1972. As with

most family businesses, the kids grew up around the company.

"Our kids were pulling weeds for a penny a weed when they were preschoolers," said Dorothy Malisani.

Being able to count on family members is helpful because of the time it takes to become skilled at

working with custom tile.

"It takes four to five years to train someone to become a tile craftsman," said Tony Malisani.

The business depends on foreign suppliers for much of its product.

"Most of the tile is from quarries outside the United States," said Art Jr.

He estimated that 90 percent of that goes to Italy for processing, or cutting it into slabs. Norway, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe are a few of the other countries that sell quarried stone.

Montana has one stone quarry south of Livingston. A contractor working on a project at New Jersey's Penn Station was trying to match the original stone, which came from Montana. Referrals led the contractor in New Jersey to Malisani Inc., which was able to supply the tiles needed to match the project.

Tile is sold at retail to the public, but accounts for less than 5 percent of their business. The bulk comes from selling and installing tile and other products for residential and commercial projects.

Tony Malisani says the most common work they get locally is producing kitchen countertops, floor and wall tiles for bathrooms and stone work around fireplaces.

"We can usually handle a residential job with three weeks lead time,

Advice to others

- Know your field and approach it with passion. Be willing to compromise when working with family.

depending on the product needed," he said.

The family figures the end of the millennium may bring some special business. Art Jr. says they are anticipating a lot of calls at the end of the year to resurface and polish cemetery monuments.

"Many are already etched with 19 — with the last two digits being filled in later at time of death, and those will need to be updated," he said.

"We try to do the best quality work possible," said Art Jr. "It is a technical trade. If improperly installed tile product will come off the wall, especially on saunas."

That diligence and attention to detail have gained the family recognition in the industry. In 1972, Art Malisani Sr. was named Craftsman of the Year by the Great Falls Society of Architects for work he completed at the airport.

In 1992 Art Jr. received the same award for a marble shower he created.