

Mannis' hard work pays off for himself, others

Honor flights for veterans one way Knoxville native has been able to give back

By Bonny C. Millard

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Eddie Mannis, Knoxville businessman, entrepreneur, volunteer and donor, grew up understanding the value of hard work.

He says he knew it would be the defining factor in his life.

That standard has seen his company, Prestige Cleaners/Prestige Tuxedo, grow from a start-up using 30-year-old dry cleaning equipment to a business with a state-of-the art facility in North Knoxville.

Prestige has 10 additional locations throughout Knoxville and in Oak Ridge and runs six routes for free pickup and delivery. The company also operates a tuxedo division and a disaster restoration branch with about 200 employees.

This spring, Prestige won the Impact Award from the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce, one of the annual Pinnacle Business Awards that spotlight the region's best companies. The Impact Award honors the business that has shown a commitment to making the community, "a better place to live through the development and support of community projects and programs."

Prestige Cleaners recently had its 30th anniversary in March.

“We started Prestige in March 1985,” says Mannis, who admits he doesn’t always take the time to celebrate successes. “But we are going to do something. I’m going to do something for my employees to celebrate the success of 30 years.”

Odd jobs

Mannis grew up in a community known as Frog Level, a part of the Inskip neighborhood in North Knoxville, with hard-working parents who expected the same out of their children.

Mannis says he never slept late because his dad always got him up early with chores that needed to be done. He’s been an early riser ever since.

He started working odd jobs by the time he was 13. He worked for a florist during holidays, and at the old Woolworth’s on Broadway as a janitor. His father managed restaurants, and Mannis was a dishwasher.

“My siblings and I, we all know the value of hard work. My dad always used to say, ‘if it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right. And if it’s not worth doing right, then just don’t do it.’ I remember him saying that over and over.”

That was a lesson that has imprinted itself on the map of Mannis’ life.

“I think my friends would say that I’m very intense and focused. I think that comes from always thinking it has to be done right. I don’t want to spend time just halfway doing things. As I get older sometimes that drive becomes exhausting.”

Creating ways to give back

Hard work and maximum effort are something that he’s not only applied to his business, but also in his generosity of spirit and heart for the community.

Mannis founded HonorAir Knoxville, a nonprofit organization that flies American veterans to Washington D.C. free of charge for a day of visiting war monuments and of fellowship with other veterans. This fall, HonorAir will take its 19th flight since the program started just eight years ago.

“I think it’s important when you’ve been entrusted with the success – and there are lots of companies that have success – it’s important to share that. It’s not about how much money you make or how much money you give, but it’s about the person you help, that you pick up, that you take along the journey.”

He’s involved in many other different causes that benefit the Knoxville area and frequently opens his Kingston Pike home to nonprofit events. Mannis serves on the boards of the Knoxville Zoo, Covenant Health and the Metropolitan Knoxville Airport Authority.

Through Prestige Cleaners, Mannis established in 2007 Project Classroom, which provides grants to area schools to help fund educational extras not covered by school systems' budgets. As of this past school year, Project Classroom has distributed \$135,000 in grants to school systems in Knox, Anderson and Blount counties since the program's inception.

Prestige Cleaners has partnered with KARM, Knox Area Rescue Ministries, and has cleaned 170,000 coats for KARM's annual Coats for the Cold program for the past 14 years. Prestige Cleaners' 11 locations also have drop off bins for coat donations.



Mannis learned what really hard work is when he moved to Florida to cut ferns for 10 hours a day.
-- Chase Malone | The Ledger

Mannis served as deputy to Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero and chief operating officer until June 2013 when he returned full-time to the private sector and his expanding business. He currently serves as the treasurer for Rogero's re-election campaign.

'It's not about money'

Janet Testerman, who's known Mannis for years, says he is respected and loved by the community.

"He's got an entrepreneurial spirit," explains Testerman, president of Knoxville's Dogwood Arts Festival.

"He carries that business acumen and that know-how, and that's how he's been successful with the various organizations he's been involved with. His role, personally and professionally and publicly, has been wholly seamless."

Mannis gives freely and often of his time, trying to make the community he grew up in better – but don't call him a philanthropist. He doesn't like that word, and he says it doesn't accurately reflect what he does.

“You can make a difference. It's not about money. You can make a difference with your time, your energy, and sometimes that's the harder thing to do. Sometimes the easy way to do something is to give money. Sometimes the bigger sacrifice is giving of yourself.

“When I speak to younger professional people, I try to get them to understand,” he adds.

“Money is relative, but there's so many ways you can make a difference in the community and not write a check. I think that you should give back to whatever level, whatever capacity you can. If you're in business, you should look for ways to make a difference in the community in which you serve.”

Testerman says that Mannis always gives 150 percent at whatever he does.

“He's a self-made individual,” she explains. “He set a standard with Prestige Cleaners when he started that, and he's maintained that standard both for his company, for the community, and has really taken this opportunity to give back. He's one of the most gracious and generous individuals. He's been an advocate or ambassador for many causes whether he started them or not.”

Staying grounded

Despite all of the accomplishments Mannis has achieved, he remains humble and grateful for what he has. Mannis says he made a commitment to himself to stay humble regardless of the success he's had.

“I think so many people in business lose their way because they fail to be humble, and they don't know really what humility is,” he notes.

“You work hard, and I feel like we've all worked hard for success. But I also know that you can lose that very quickly. I think staying grounded is very important for any business owner because you always have to keep sight of where you came from.”

Mannis credits his employees with helping him to build the business and for carrying out his vision. He says he values their input and that collaboration is an important part of the daily operation.

“I think the secret with what success I've had...I know that I haven't done it alone. I've never been a one-man show. My management team and all of my employees buy into what we're doing.”

Customer service and hospitality are important to Mannis whether it's in his business or helping out a nonprofit organization or guests in his home.

“I toe the line when it comes to customer service.”

“I know people say ‘well that’s a culture you’ve had to set, and it is a culture. The whole customer service and taking care of the customer is a culture. But employees can decide whether they want to buy into that or not.’”

Cutting ferns in Florida

Mannis understands the importance of treating his employees well and establishing a pleasant work environment. Perhaps part of that insight comes from working his way up in the business world.

After graduating from Central High School in 1977, he moved to Florida for about a year.

The transition after high school was not an easy one for Mannis. His parents had divorced, and like many young adults, he was trying to figure out the direction of his life. The one thing he knew about was hard work, and he fell back on that principle while living in Florida.

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“I moved to Florida with a very good friend of mine, and his family worked in the ferneries. I would go out in the fields and cut fern for 10 hours a day. Literally bent over with a pair of clippers, cutting fern 10 hours a day.

“And if you really want to know what hard work is all about ... I would climb in the back of a truck, and they would take us out, and we would cut fern – fern they would use for floral arrangements. It’s all cut manually.”

Mannis returned home, enrolled in junior college courses and, later, night classes at Maryville College.

By 1980, he was working in the industry that would change the course of his life. Fate stepped in a few years later with a chance opportunity.

“I was working at Sanitary Laundry and Cleaners,” he says, recalling a time when he continued taking college courses. “I was doing pickup and delivery. I would drive from house to house and pick up laundry and dry cleaning.

“I was looking through the classifieds one Sunday afternoon probably in late 1984. And it said, ‘used dry cleaning equipment for sale.’”

Mannis still remembers the number's prefix – 584 – because that was the area he was delivering dry cleaning to. The ad intrigued him, so he called to find out about the equipment. A man answered the phone, and they struck up a friendly conversation and later met for coffee.

Stewart Wong owned the 30-year-old equipment, and he was willing to offer owner financing. Mannis sold his car and boat for the down payment.

Working with his mom

“I opened the first location in 1985 with three employees on Newcomb Avenue. It was the old Bearden Hardware,” he says.

“One of the three employees was my mother. She'll tell you about the story today. My mother is the only person who has quit so many times. One time, she quit and drove around the block and came back.”

When he first purchased the equipment, he didn't have a roadmap to a particular destination, but the hard work principle sustained him as he made his way into the new venture.

“I just knew that I knew what hard work was, and I wasn't afraid to work hard. I had enough knowledge of laundry and dry cleaning to know that it was a need. I knew nothing about the process, but I did know customer service. I knew the value of customer service.”

The building on Newcomb Avenue probably had 3,000 square feet, but Mannis says the business was only using half of it while subletting out the rest of it for office space. As the business grew, he stopped subleasing the offices so he could expand his operations and even went into a building behind the main facility.

As the business grew, so did the workload and the anxiety. During the late 80s, Prestige had seen significant growth, and at times, Mannis questioned his future in the business.

“I remember those days. We were working 16-hour days, and I would be exhausted. I would go home, fall in the bed, get back up and go to work at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. Start all over and do it again. We were just trying to get the work out. We didn't have any systems. We didn't know systems.”

Tickets were written up by hand and stacked alphabetically. Customers would start coming in at 5 p.m. after work to pick up their orders, and if the clothes weren't ready, they would get upset.

The physical tickets would invariably fall onto the floor and get out of order. Times were tough for the young business and Mannis.

[It was] “probably in 1988 or 89,” he recalls. “It was like, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore. I can’t do this anymore, but what I am going to do?’

“So fortunately, I didn’t have anything else to do so I kept pushing forward. And there were some really tough times. I mean I was trying to learn how to do this on my own and how to manage cash flow, how to manage this tremendous growth that was coming at me, and it was coming at me so quickly, I couldn’t manage it.”

Struggling in the 80s

Mannis didn’t have the credit to borrow money, so everything for his expanding business had to be funded with cash.

“Cash got tight in the late 80s. It’s (a) struggle with all small businesses, but I didn’t really know that at that point.”

It was a time of learning and growing as a business owner. The lessons that Mannis learned then about dealing with stress have stayed with him.

“I can remember the angst, talking about stress and tension. Once you go through all that, you do learn to manage stress so the more stressful the situation, the more calm, typically, the more relaxed I get.”

The 1990s became a boom time for Prestige Cleaners.

“1994 is when I bought the property where our main facility is now off of Taggart Lane, off of Emory, and built a state-of-the-art processing facility. So that’s where everything is done today, and every other location we have is now a retail location.”

Mannis knows his hard work and the ability to fight through difficult times has paid off, but he also says that he can’t take credit for it all.

“I’m very grateful for what I’ve been blessed with,” he says. “...I’m not a rich person. Rich is relative, but I never really want to be a rich person. I want to be a successful person who makes a difference and helps people along the way.”