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An Entrepreneur With A Steely Resolve For Metals

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Rob Marelli Jr. took a big chance nearly four years ago. Armed with a \$250,000 loan from his father-in-law and a belief that he could succeed, he started a small metals manufacturing business with four employees.

Then he took another chance this past year.

Marelli moved into a rundown warehouse on Cross Road and he and his workers transformed it into a brightly lit manufacturing plant churning out work for a host of blue-chip customers, from the giant Target retailing chain to the Starbucks coffee colossus.

Today, Seconn Fabrication in Waterford generates multimillion-dollar annual revenues, runs two busy shifts of workers and is already eyeing expansion plans to meet its growing needs.

"We went from four people to forty-eight last year," says Marelli. "And from hoping the phone will ring to \$7.2 million in revenues," he adds. This year, in fact, the firm's full-time work force is up to 50 and Marelli anticipates 2007 revenues between \$8.5 million and \$10 million.

As the 40-year-old Marelli says, there's no looking back now.

"I had a newborn at home," Marelli recalls when he opened his small shop in July 2003. "But my wife said 'give it a shot. You've got this idea, I think you can make it work.'" His wife Susan is the daughter of Martin Sullivan, the successful New London automotive entrepreneur.

Marelli's first shop was located on Route 85 near the Waterford Speedbowl. But it soon became obvious there was plenty of work out there for the small shop, and Marelli began experiencing growing pains.

When the former Sears warehouse on Cross Road became available, he jumped at the chance for expansion – recognizing the risk, but also the reward for his company and for its employees.

Marelli, who worked in metal fabricating before opening his own shop, says he put his faith in his employees to make it all work.

So far, it's paid off for Marelli, now the father of three girls, and his workers.

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Its products range from the metal display racks at Starbucks to the overhead light fixtures at Target stores. Its metal brackets hold the overhead emergency lights on police cruisers and emergency vehicles. Alarm companies use its metal boxes to house their equipment. Its vertical metal towers house high-end audio equipment and its data storage cabinets can fit a host of computer gear and accompanying wiring and cables. Seconn Fabrication's customer list has included names like Bose, Nike, Reebok and Timberland.

Marelli says his firm also has been chosen to be part of a team that will help build a chassis for a new General Motors concept car.

Marelli credits his skilled work force for the firm's success. "Some of these guys took a pay cut to come here," he adds, or commuted long distances. "I have one guy who used to drive down from Providence every day," he says.

Marelli says his employees work hard, and they're rewarded. "You've got to give back to get," he says. The company offers semi-annual bonuses, plenty of overtime and benefits. Marelli eventually hopes to offer an employee stock-ownership plan.

"The only way we're going to succeed going forward is that we're all going to grow old together," he vows. Marelli says he believes in empowering his workers, so he's committed to lean manufacturing principles and quality techniques.

"We've created an environment here where people want to go to work," he says. The firm's workers are trained in at least three various work stations. It's all about resource allocation, he explains.

"We make our dates (for customers)," Marelli says. "If it involves nights, weekends, whatever, our responsibility is to the customer."

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Marelli says his biggest challenge is to continue to find the skilled workers who can work in a metal fabrication manufacturing plant. "We've got the ball rolling here, but one of the problems we found was that we can't find more experienced people," Marelli says. The average age of his worker is 41 – with an average of 12 years of experience.

"We're young, we're aggressive, and we've taken the opportunity and reinvented ourselves," Marelli says.

Marelli says his firm relies more on specialized orders as well as niche-type business. "The blanket orders are gone," he says. "Nobody wants inventory on their shelves anymore."

He says his background in business and technical management – he attended Western New England College in Springfield, Mass. – have helped him with his growing business.

But he says his business philosophy is broader than just a balance sheet and profit-and-loss statement. Successful firms build relationships with customers and have the ability to take complex jobs and deliver customer service. "We found our niche based on service and the velocity of our execution plan," Marelli says.

Seconn Fabrication has invested more than \$4 million in complex machinery, including machines that use intricate lasers to cut metal in precise locations and designs.

Marelli also says the company's success has him contemplating future expansion. Seconn Fabrication sits on a 5.5-acre parcel and can add an additional 26,000 square feet to its factory floor, nearly doubling its current footprint of 33,000 square feet.

"We want to grow right here," says Marelli. "I live in Waterford, I work in Waterford, my wife grew up here. I'm here for the long haul," he says.

Total 2 images.





Patrick Patterson, **top photo**, grinds excess welds off of metal work at Seconn Fabrication. **Tim Cook**/The Day

Seconn Fabrication employees, **above**, apply a thin powder coating to metal parts hanging in an automated conveyor line inside a spray booth. The coating is then heated onto the metal, producing a smooth finish. **Tim Cook** / The Day