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the making of a dynasty



Glenwood is located in Shediac, N.B. Can you guess what what else Shediac is famous for?

His father reigned for 10 years as one of New Brunswick's most popular premiers. Now, James McKenna is establishing himself as a leader in the Atlantic wood industry by taking Shediac, New Brunswick's Glenwood Kitchen to new heights.

At the age of 31, James McKenna is vice president of an 80,000 square-foot industrial cabinet plant with 115 employees that ships 175 cabinets every day from Shediac to New England, the Caribbean, Alberta and all across the Maritimes. He sits on the Shediac town committee that is looking for ways to revitalize the tourism industry in the area, and he is president of Enterprise Southeast, the regional economic development agency. A business-school graduate of St. Francis Xavier University and the son of a legendary politician whose party won every seat in the New Brunswick legislature in 1987, McKenna is obviously destined for leadership.

"Imagine walking into a factory with 115 employees at the age of 24 and saying, 'Here I am; I'm your boss,'" McKenna says. That was the size of the challenge facing him when he left his job selling commercial energy contracts in southern Ontario and returned to New Brunswick to manage the cabinet shop his father purchased in 2002. "[Frank] wanted to stay involved in the New Brunswick business community," McKenna explains. "His primary base is in Toronto, now, doing the banking thing," referring to Frank McKenna having joined TD Financial Group as deputy chair in 2006, following a one-year stint as Canada's ambassador to the United States.

The McKennas found the opportunity at Glenwood through a business broker. The previous owners were looking to retire, but wanted to turn the shop over to someone that would look after the employees and keep it a going concern. The McKennas were impressed with the Beliveau family's work ethic and trustworthiness, and they are still involved with the company today. Robert Beliveau is general manager, and Armand Beliveau, one of the previous owners, still comes in on a casual basis. "We built a little room for him and he has a shop in there," McKenna says. "He still comes in and tinkers away. It is good to have his presence because he has so much knowledge."

This connection with the old ownership made McKenna's transition into leadership much easier. He says he had to deal with a few employees in the first months that were "resistant to change," but after successfully meeting that challenge, he has had few problems since.

McKenna has taken the company through quite a few changes. He has invested heavily in automated equipment, including a new optimizing panel saw, dowel machine and edgebander. The design department will be changing and upgrading its software platform soon, and doors are inspected under an ultraviolet light that causes any bad glue lines to fluoresce. Parts are labeled and travel from one work cell to another in vertical trolleys, and all waste is collected and either burned to heat the building or sold to campers for firewood. There is a new air exchange system in the finishing area that is so efficient, there is not even a smell in the air.

None of these production elements were in place when McKenna first arrived, but he has been able to integrate them successfully and see business continue to grow. "A few years ago," he says, "the general manager and I wouldn't be able to leave this place without our cell phones ringing off the hook. But we have good employees and now things run pretty smoothly by themselves."

Shediac is right at the heart of Acadian culture, and McKenna has been able to find

hard-working, loyal people by keeping his company close to the community and bringing some their values into his business philosophy. His personal ties to the people in the plant are obvious. As he moves through the plant, McKenna knows everyone by name and can make a pretty close guess at how long they have worked there. Some of those numbers are surprising: McKenna is able to point out at least a dozen workers with 20 years' seniority and most of the rest have 10 years or more.

Most of them do not appear to be retirement age, either, and McKenna acknowledges that many of Glenwood's employees started work there in their teens.

McKenna has apparently found a cure for the chronic disease of worker turnover. Being one of the few large industries in town obviously helps. And the Beliveaus were clearly well liked as employers. But McKenna has taken strides to keep Glenwood, its employees and the community even closer. One way that he does that is by not treating workers as disposable commodities. "We have a few people looking to retire," McKenna says, "and some who just want to slow down and work part time. That is great, we are all for that. We find the older employees work very well. I'd hire more people over 55 if I could find them."

Asked how he is able to retain employees so well, McKenna gives an answer that, at first, appears to be a non sequitur. "We have 50 percent women here," he reports. "We started at 30 percent and every year we have increased our hiring of women. We find this gives us a good name in the community. Word gets out that this is a good place to work and good people show up at our door. We have a lot of families working here."



Glenwood is highly vertically integrated, building every component of the cabinet, including drawers and doors, right from rough lumber to finish and assembly.



The workforce is half women, and McKenna says that helps Glenwood's profile in the community.

message that Glenwood is a participating and compassionate member of the community, and the community responds.

Glenwood makes sure no one gets stale in his job by cross-training all the employees to work in parts of the plant other than their normal stations. "It was a challenge for the workers to get their heads around the change to cross-training," McKenna admits. "But now, we always have back-ups when there is a special need in some area." The contribution to job satisfaction seems to be working. Most of the workers on Glenwood's floor appear relaxed and happy.

The company puts a float in the town parade and holds walkathons for charity every year. Everyone in the plant works an extra hour every day and gets off work at 11 a.m. on Fridays. There is a barbeque after work every Thursday in the summer. McKenna sends the



Quality checks at every work cell keep Glenwood's product ahead of local competitors.

jammed marketplace, he says, "Pricewise we can

Along with his workers and his roots, most of McKenna's competition comes from the community. "Acadian culture is very hands-on," he says. "There are 10 cabinet shops in a 20-mile radius, and everyone with a garage will make boxes for you if you ask. We have a showroom and a warranty and a reputation for excellent work. But we pay taxes and have overhead and they don't."

Lest anyone think that all this community involvement has distracted Glenwood from making money, McKenna points out that the company has grown every year since its inception in 1965. He says his American sales have dropped from 55 to 45 percent of the business, but growth in the Canadian West from a new dealer has made up the difference. He is now eyeing Ontario. Asked if he thinks he can compete in Ontario's

compete. And our labour costs are a fraction of what they are in Ontario. Even with shipping, we should be able to be less expensive. Everything is cheaper in the Maritimes. We have done such a great job of negotiating with our suppliers that I am sure we are getting the same deal as a mid-size company that the larger producers are."

That's just the plan for Glenwood. Having turned this company into a stable money-maker, McKenna is willing to muse about new directions in the future. "We would like to get into other like-minded businesses," he says. "We have been researching the wood waste industry. Anything involving export we would be interested in. We already have trucks going across the border every day. Maybe something in value-added wood: mouldings, doors."

If the steady leadership that James McKenna has shown so far at Glenwood Kitchen is any indication, this may be the start of something big in New Brunswick.



He's met the challenge of managing a medium-size cabinet producer. What is next for James McKenna?