

Monthly Member Business Spotlight

Hugh Sullivan

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This month's Business Spotlight is on Cheshire Chamber member, Hugh Sullivan. Hugh actually owns two distinct firms: (1) Hand E Construction Services, LLC, an indoor/outdoor home maintenance and repair business, specializing in bathroom and kitchen remodels and (2) Liquid Stone, focusing on refacing outdoor walkways, front stoops, decks, showers, tile floors, countertops and walls. The durable, chemical resistant, waterproof, easy-to-clean application transforms problem areas into show pieces.

In The Beginning

Hugh wasn't always an entrepreneur. He began in the business world with companies such as Lanier Copiers and AT&T, working his way up the ladder to high level positions (e.g., AT&T's Client Signature Team managing their top 250 customers). Hugh then moved on to positions with Pulte Homes and Turner Construction, managing their construction projects at Cheshire Crossings, Oxford Greens, and Blue Back Square.

Starting Out On His Own

It was at that point, with a love for construction and a passion for home maintenance and repair, that Hugh decided to start his own business. He proved he could work hard and help companies make money, and felt strongly he could do the same for himself and his family. As Hugh put it, "I wanted to do what made me happy and did not want to depend on anyone else to provide income for me and my family." And so, in 2009, Hugh launched Hand E Construction. This was a very tough time for Hugh and his wife, Erica. Erica was recovering from a serious accident...one that she almost did not survive. Hugh was at Erica's side for her five surgeries and all her doctor appointments. "It was a scary, terrifying time for our family," said Hugh. Not only was he working on starting a business, but was also taking care of Erica and their three boys. "I was taking a big risk at a bad time, but *we all* made it work – it's

a great success story.” And one that no doubt makes the entire Sullivan family very proud.

The Right Decision?

When asked when he knew that he had made the right decision about going into business for himself, Hugh said it was when he had friends and family asking him to do work for them. “I never doubted my ability to start and run my own business, but their trusting me to do great work, at reasonable prices, really reinforced my decision.” Hugh was encouraged to follow his passion. That passion, coupled with quality workmanship, affordability, and client trust led Hugh’s business to grow quickly. Advertising for one month led to 60 phone inquiries, from which Hugh made 30 quotes...and his business gained even more momentum. This was an unexpected, but pleasant surprise. Of course, after Erica’s accident, Hugh consciously put the brakes on his business plans for a while, “My first priority was Erica and my boys, and I worked on my business when I could find the time.”

Advantages & Disadvantages

When asked about some of the advantages and disadvantages of being a small business owner, Hugh said “The advantage is the personal touch I can offer my customers by helping them to improve their homes and lives. I will have these customers for life and want to be everyone’s handyman. The disadvantage is that I *am* the business – no sick days!”

Challenges & Opportunities

Hugh says the largest challenge is that his business is rapidly growing and that he needs to adapt to that growth while continuing to offer high quality service. The biggest opportunity Hugh has is taking his Liquid Stone business commercial/ industrial. He believes this represents tremendous growth opportunity, but also needs to continue focusing on marketing and advertising according to his business plan.

Value Proposition

Hugh believes the value proposition that helps to differentiate his businesses in the marketplace is that he offers high quality service and measures his success based on client satisfaction. Basically, Hugh says “I deliver on what I promise.” And, he continues “Liquid Stone is a *unique* service that can transform problems into showpieces.”

Ideal Clients

For Hand E Construction, Hugh’s ideal clients are the folks that need multiple things fixed in their home. As Hugh puts it “They don’t need to call five different people – they just need to call me.” For Liquid Stone, Hugh’s ideal client is anyone unhappy

with the cosmetic look of their outside walkway, steps, decks, bathrooms, tile floors, and countertops. They want to make significant cosmetic improvements without significant expense. When assessing prospective client needs, Hugh usually asks the following basic questions: (1) What don't you like about your home? (2) If you could improve the look of something you like about your home (e.g., update cosmetics on your formica countertop) what would you like it to look like? (3) What repairs are you putting off that will have serious long term effects on the integrity of your home (e.g., cracked walkways, leaking bathroom floors).

The Future

When asked about the future of his companies, Hugh says his five year vision is to be servicing all of Connecticut and Massachusetts. He sees three or four work crews and expects his employees will grow with the business, especially since they're starting out on the ground floor. Near term, Hugh wants to set up a showroom, and longer term he plans to become more involved with commercial/industrial business.

On A Personal Note

On a personal note, Hugh met Erica while both were attending New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Hugh is originally from Birmingham, Michigan and Erica is from Stamford, Connecticut. They moved to Cheshire in 2005. Hugh wants to spend as much time as possible with his family while, at the same time, offering a consistent high service/quality level to his customers. Hugh's quick to say that he wouldn't be able to do it without Erica. She spends 24 hours a day taking care of the family and also helping Hugh with the business...networking, creating flyers, etc.. Hugh says "Starting the business is very demanding, but we make sure we spend quality time together as a family – and take time to appreciate what we have." They are very excited about the opportunity for their kids to be involved in the business in the future. Hugh's Dad worked for one company his entire career, but told Hugh he always wished he had his own business that he could have passed down to Hugh. Hugh and Erica want to provide that opportunity for their own kids.

For fun, Hugh says the family likes to ski in Killington. Erica runs 25 miles per week. Wyatt (3) likes to play golf, soccer, basketball, and football. Stuart (10) enjoys soccer, skiing, golf, and rugby. Daniel (12) skis, plays golf, rugby, trumpet and is involved with the chess club and robotics camp. One of their family's favorite activities is movie night in their family room – just hanging out together.

Any Advice?

We asked Hugh if he had any advice for small business owners just starting out, or those who are "bumped up against the ceiling of complexity". Hugh said "Don't let the dream die. Have a business plan and focus. Have a plan to get there and don't be afraid of failure. Try marketing yourself in many different ways, and take advantage of technology."

Hugh also likes to work with local people. He joined the Chamber to meet other business owners in Cheshire. I want to do as much business as possible with the Members. Hugh says “I’m a true believer in helping local businesses, and I always thank my customers for supporting their local businesses. He’s also a big “Made in America” fan and prefers to hire from the local area. His favorite supplier is Diach Coatings Company. As Hugh says, “We have the same high quality/service goals and work well together. They’ll do whatever it takes to help me – that’s how I want my customers to feel about me.”