



Changing Playing Fields:

A Profile of John Dellalana and Rowley Spring and Stamping

By Gary McCoy,
Managing Editor

A recent Cadillac commercial pays homage to all the great innovations and inventions that started in garages: HP, Apple, Amazon and numerous other hugely famous companies. The same humble garage origins can be claimed by many companies in the spring industry, including Rowley Spring and Stamping, which was started in the garage of its founder, Stan Bitel, in 1954.

Bitel, now 93, is no longer involved in the day-to-day operations of the company he grew and built from scratch over 60 years ago. Wanting to keep the business in the family, Bitel's two daughters, Darlene Krammer and Camilla Farrell, looked for assistance. In 2013 they turned to someone outside the spring industry, John Dellalana, to run Rowley Spring and Stamping.

“I was working as vice president of integrated operations at a big defense company when I was asked to join Rowley,” explained Dellalana regarding his entrance to the company as president. “Working in very large corporations throughout my whole career, the entrepreneurial opportunities to lead a small company were exciting. In particular, I was excited to join a company with so many capabilities and growth potential. The ownership and people won me over quickly and I’ve now been here a year and a half.”

One of Bitel’s original coilers from his garage is now situated in the lobby of the company, which occupies a 150,000 sq. ft. facility in Bristol, Conn.

“Stan accumulated equipment and added expertise,” explained Dellalana, “so today Rowley Spring offers full tool making and design capabilities with EDM machines, stamping, secondary equipment, fourslide machines, spring and wire formers. We have about 500 machines.”

Rowley currently has a workforce of around 100 people, many with decades of experience with the company.

Jokingly Dellalana says his wife, Sherry, and children, Laura, Michelle, and Johnny, often refer to the products made by Rowley Spring as “doodads and widgets.”

The company boasts of making products for a variety of industries, including medical, defense, commercial and automotive.

“We make metal pins, contacts, springs and housings,” said Dellalana of Rowley Springs product portfolio. “Our products range from the popper in the Trouble game to levers in antitank launchers and springs in medical delivery devices. We ship about one million parts a day. That’s a lot of parts!”

The New Playing Field

A native of Parsippany, N.J., Dellalana got his degree in electrical engineering from Penn State University and an MBA from Rutgers University. Before joining Rowley

Spring, Dellalana had spent time at the aforementioned large defense companies including AlliedSignal, BAE Aerospace and DRS Technologies.

He says coming in as an outsider to the spring and metal forming industry was quite a switch.

“When you work for a defense contractor you don’t really get an understanding of real cost containment and how important it is to stay quick on your feet from a marketing standpoint,” explained Dellalana of the change.

Dellalana’s previous experience was in operations, focused on supply chain execution. “Coming here that’s just one element of the job,” he says. “The whole job is from the front end of the business all the way to the back end. I wanted to get that type of exposure.”

He added, “I felt like I had really good experience with really good companies, but the job at Rowley Spring would expose me to every part of the business in a completely different playing field with different challenges. So here you have red hot competition, much quicker decision making and that’s kind of what excited me to join. And the people here were really, really good.”

Indeed it was the workforce at Rowley who ultimately convinced Dellalana to join them.

“The day I decided to make the switch, I saw the type of capabilities that this place had and the type of people and the longevity it represented with the hundreds and thousands of years of experience that the people who currently work here have,” explained Dellalana. “I just saw the potential this place represented and the room for growth and an ownership team that was willing to make it happen. That’s when I decided.”

Dellalana said when he worked for other companies, a thousand parts of month was a big deal. “Here at Rowley we do a million parts a day,” he chuckled. “So you don’t really get an understanding of the legacy of the spring industry and what it means for this area and how far it goes back until you enter and you see how deep it is.”

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Stan Bitel's original coiler from his garage now occupies a prominent position in the lobby of Rowley Spring and Stamping.





Rowley Spring and Stamping employees gathered in June 2014 to celebrate the company's 60th anniversary.

He admits that he still has a lot to learn about the industry, but enjoys the whole different set of challenges that it represents.

Celebrating 60 Years

In June of 2014, Rowley celebrated its 60th anniversary with a company picnic. "The ownership team talked about some of the old times and the way their father used to be involved in the business," said Dellalana.

"It was a good chance to honor Stan and what he had done," explained Dellalana. "He wasn't able to be with us that day, but it was nice to have his daughters here and to celebrate Stan who was the visionary behind everything that this company is today."

In celebration of the day, the company gave each employee a "Stan Buck" which was the size of a dollar bill. "But instead of it being a picture of George Washington, it was a picture of Stan."

Dellalana said they gave every employee 60 dollars as a small way to thank them for their service to the company. He said the average seniority at the company is around 18 years. "We have five or six people who are going to retire in the next year, so it will be hard to replace all those years of experience they represent."

In addition to honoring its founder, several years ago Rowley recognized one of its longtime employees, Manny Tavares, who passed away in 2012. Tavares served as Bitel's "right hand man" for years. As Bitel began to phase out of the business, Tavares was responsible for running the company.

Dellalana says when Tavares got sick and began to phase out of the business, the company was being run by a leadership committee. Bringing Dellalana on board was a recognition that the company needed a leader to lead and grow the business with an eye toward the future.

A plaque in the company's lobby recognizes Tavares' legacy at Rowley.

A Focus on Execution

As the new leader of Rowley, Dellalana leans on his business philosophy which was shaped by a lifelong career in engineering and manufacturing which was focused on the word "execution."

Dellalana says, "I learned a lot about 'act-on-fact' decision making from my blackbelt training and AlliedSignal days, and rely heavily on lean principles."

He explains that execution not only applies to making a part, it extends to all business processes.

"To do it right," he says, "you need to create a culture where ideas are a valued currency, problems are surfaced and everyone participates in continuous improvement. It really does take an army!"

An advocate for using idea boards and skip level meetings, Dellalana believes this helps open up communication that cuts through all levels of the organization.

"Lots of time has been spent developing supplier partnerships, streamlining our quote process, developing good feedback channels and providing a robust quality

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system,” he explains. “There’s a lot of competition, both locally and overseas, and customers are very discriminating.”

Jumping Into the Industry

While a newcomer to the spring industry, Dellalana hasn’t hesitated to get involved. He recently became a board member of the Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce and NESMA.

He recognizes the legacy of the industry to the Bristol area since the 1700s. “Lots of know-how and pride exists here.”

Like most SMI members, Dellalana recognizes that finding qualified tradespeople is one of the hardest parts about being in the spring industry.

“More tradespeople have and will retire than will enter these fields. This shortage makes it critical to offer internal advancement opportunities and apprenticeship programs and strong associations with trade schools and education centers.”

Rowley is partnering with the Bristol Adult Education Center, which is ironically located in the on the other side of the building that Rowley owns in Bristol, to provide a solution to the problem (see related article on page 29) in the form of a workplace development program. Students spend time in the classroom learning about the industry and then hands on time in Rowley’s factory. The pilot program started in September 2014 and Dellalana says the results so far are very encouraging.

On Court or the Homefront

When Dellalana took the job at Rowley, he decided not to uproot his family from their home in Monroe, Conn. Instead he makes the nearly hour-long commute northeast to Bristol each day. Monroe is a town in Fairfield County, Conn. with a population of nearly 20,000.

In Dellalana’s spare time, he enjoys playing basketball and golf.

“I can’t shoot either a golf ball or basketball straight,” he commented,” but it doesn’t stop me from playing in an adult basketball league and some golf.”

He adds with a laugh, “I guess being horrible is not something that scares me away from something.”

That humility on the fairway and hardwoods extends to Monroe where his wife, Sherry, is what he describes as a “mini-celebrity.”

Sherry has run a day care program out of the Dellalana home for two- and three-year olds for the past 12 years. Having cared for hundreds of Monroe families who have passed through her Kidcare program, Dellalana says he takes a backseat to Sherry when they go about town to attend events, such as high school football games.

“If you walk around with her at a football game, she remembers everybody’s name and you have toddlers and older kids coming up to say hi to her,” explained Dellalana. “And of course she knows all the parents.”

With pride Dellalana says his wife has done a terrific job with the business and in raising their children. He believes her tenacity, diligence and ability to multi-task has carried over to their three children.



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Rowley employees formed teams to see who could build the best softball launcher.

Both of his daughters were the valedictorians of Masuk High School in Monroe and he said, "All our children are excellent students."

Their oldest daughter, Laura, is a senior at the University of Connecticut looking to enter medical school, while

Michelle is a freshman at the University of Delaware. Johnny, a junior at Masuk High School, is the only one still at home.

A Limitless Capacity

Dellalana says as Rowley looks toward the future, keeping a relentless focus on the details will be an important value going forward.

He says with the flurry of activity that occurs at the company each day, "It all has to be done under control and done right. So managing that part is something that the people here do really well. That's why they've been in this business for a long time. They understand what it takes to do that."

Dellalana says his job is to manage the company with an eye toward the future.

"Where we want to be in three to five years is the hardest challenge," he explained. "The challenge is not to get caught up in the problems of the day, but to keep our eye on the ball of what we want this company to be in the future."

He personally believes that his job is to create a culture where people have opportunities to advance and grow the company. "That's what we're looking to do."

Dellalana's desire is to have a workforce that is committed to growth and that employees feel engaged and are part of "something bigger than just themselves."

As he looked out the window at the parking lot, Dellalana mused, "We have a very big factory and a very big parking lot and a thousand machines. We don't have a thousand people, so our capacity is limitless."

From humble garage origins, Bitel's vision has been fulfilled many times over in the field that Rowley Spring and Stamping now plays on each day with a new leader at the helm. ■

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