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WHO KNEW THEY MADE IT HERE?



TRAVERSE STAINLESS
& MILLWORK

By Clark Miller

Including its two co-owners, Traverse Stainless & Millwork normally has a workforce of just seven people. But the company carries some real weight nationally in a lucrative niche market. Ninety percent of its work involves building, then installing interiors for airport restaurants, stores, bars and passenger lounges.

The company has worked in major airports up and down the East Coast, but its high-profile remodeling work at John F. Kennedy (JFK) International Airport has created the most buzz. That's where TSM provided Delta Airlines' VIP area with a coordinated (and daring) redesign that included serpentine walls, benches and other sophisticated features. The project earned Delta and its principal contractor a #1 Best Airport Lounge in the World rating from USA Today.

TSM co-owner Scott Neil says customers spending a few relaxing moments in the remodeled Sky Lounge probably don't care who did the work, but it makes a big difference to the lead contractors who hire subcontractors like TSM.

"It's nice to have that feather in our cap, especially when general contractors ask us what we have done," Neil says. "It shows we're playing at the big table."

The company grew until the COVID pandemic hit and Neil and his business partner Dave Bitely had to lay off workers.

"You couldn't have made a worse storm," Neil said.

He is optimistic about the company's future, though, since most major airports require remodeling every few years and TSM already has a solid track record. But he acknowledges supply chain disruptions and rising costs of certain materials continue to hamper a full recovery.

"We went down to a skeleton crew, and even now, we're operating at about 50%," he said.

Some companies would have folded under the pressure. However, good business practices have helped Neil and Bitely keep TSM alive.

"From the start, we took a cautious

approach and bought only what we needed," Neil says. "Without that, we would never have made it."

It also helps that the two partners divide up their duties so each can concentrate on what he does best. Neil manages the finances and the shop while Bitely uses his previous business connections to help TSM find work. He also handles estimating, purchasing and installation.

The same thoughtful approach informs their vision for the future.

"We don't want to get too big," Neil says. "I know companies that hire 30 employees, then go to 50, and end up making less money. I'd rather be lean, mean and profitable - and share it with the guys who got us here."

Neil and Bitely also like to work with Traverse City-based vendors whenever possible. On the Sky Lounge project, for example, local upholstery shop Neuco Seating outfitted booths in leather.

Projects usually start with a conceptual drawing provided by the general contractor or client. From that information, TSM engineer Rob Arteaga creates detailed work plans.

Neil says it's demanding work because of the inability to drive onto the tarmac with a big truck, take saws and other equipment inside, and start working. Security is tight. It includes prescreening of all employees on the job and an inventory of every tool taken into (and out of) the terminal. Adding to the pressure, contractors' time on-site is very limited.

TSM deals with many different aesthetics - everything from country-style (think Cracker Barrel) to a futuristic look. That variety appeals to Neil.

"Work in a big shop and you might make 500 of the same thing. With us, the work is always changing," he said. "There's always a new piece of art to build. I love the fact we're creative."

The Grand Traverse Area Manufacturing Council (GTAMC) sponsors this column. Its mission is to support a sustainable and globally competitive manufacturing sector for a stronger economy; makegreatthings.org.