

Business

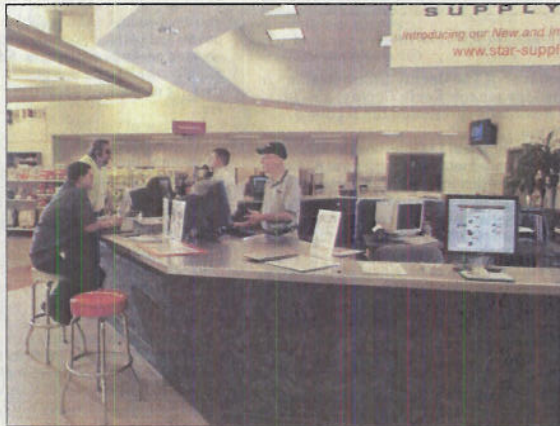
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ABOVE: Entryway to Star Supply, a distributor of heating, air conditioning, ventilation, refrigeration and sheet metal products at 118 Gando Drive in New Haven.

LEFT: Star Supply employees George Durso, right, and Mark Krauchick, second from right, man the walk-in counter.

"The success of Star Supply Company is its people."

— President Larry Cohen

By Angela Carter
Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — At 13, Larry Cohen was stamping the name of his dad's business onto invoices: The Star Supply Co.

Sure, various jobs around the warehouse, or manning the sales counter or driving trucks gave the teenager some money to spend and to save. But more importantly, it provided the foundation to the role he has held since 1979.

He's the president of a company that turned 50 this year.

"The success of Star Supply Company is its people," Cohen, 55, said, as he stood before a wall decorated with plaques, mementos from incentive trips to places such as Nassau, Costa Rica and Costa Del Sol, and a portrait of his father, the late Seymour Cohen, who founded Star Supply in April 1959.

"He was a great mentor, a great leader. Even though I was president, he was still chief. Remember that," he said in jest, glancing over at his son, Greg Cohen, 23, who is part of the company's marketing staff.

The younger Cohen laughs, and has his own memories of earning his stripes in the family-owned distribution business. "During summers off from school, I'd always work in the warehouse," Greg Cohen said, adding that he plans to go to business school for a master's degree. He has an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering.

Larry Cohen said his son could possibly be designing products for company some day. "With the engineering background, he could lead us into the next generation of going green," he said.

Star Supply is a wholesale distributor of supplies for clients in the heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) industry such as Honeywell, McLain, Mitsubishi and The Trane Co., which has awarded Star Supply as a top distributor 25 times. The company does not export. Its customer base is in Connecticut and Western Massachusetts.

Star Supply also distributes refrigeration and sheet metal products.

"I believe there's still room for growth here," Cohen said of his existing service area. "We operate completely out of one facility. We have no branches."

The intimate staff of 50 is based in a 165,000-square-foot building on Gando Drive. The company

STAR QUALITY

HVAC SUPPLIER STILL GOING STRONG AT 50



Peter Hitzel/Register photos

Larry Cohen, president of The Star Supply Co., left, and his son, Greg Cohen, stand in the company warehouse. Employee Medar Kajemba, background, drives by with a tow motor.

See 50 years, F2

50 Years: Star sets shining example

Continued from F1

has moved from prior locations at Olive and Water streets and later State and Lawrence streets.

Cohen said that when he was searching for a larger facility to accommodate the company's expansion needs, his three requirements were that the new building be in New Haven, have a big-box layout and sit near the highway. "He delivered them all," Cohen said of a Realtor.

The offices were built with room for 25 percent growth in personnel, Cohen said.

When they moved the operation to Gando Drive three years ago, the staff pulled off a surprise under the code name "Project X."

The way Senior Vice President Bob Parsons tells it, the boss didn't have a clue his employees and family were conspiring to

buy him a canary yellow golf cart to maneuver the 100,000-square-foot warehouse portion of the building.

"A salesman, Steve Szypulski, approached me and we decided to reach out to vendors and several employees. Manufacturers responded with open arms. Larry is an icon in this industry. We called it Project X. Larry finds his way around the office, so we knew if we called it that and he would see anything, he wouldn't know what it was," Parsons said.

Well, that was a mixed bag for Cohen, who was delighted over the gesture that he gets gently ribbed about. Still. "I felt like I was slipping," he said. "I like to golf, I just wish I was a little better at it."

Parsons has worked at Star Supply for 18 years and has a profound comfort there. "I love

working with this size of a company. You get to actually touch people's lives more. They're not just a number or an ID badge. That's the way Larry runs the business. I think we're a good fit for each other," he said.

Both Parsons and Cohen said company staff are trained to be versatile and fill in where there is a need, but they also are encouraged to pursue their professional development interests.

"A lot of the employees are so loyal to the company and the company is loyal to the employees, I think," said Andrea Klein, who has served as controller for the past five years. She found the job with the help of a head hunter. Her first and last interview during the search was with Star Supply.

"Thankfully, everything just fell into place," she said.

Twelve years is the average tenure among employees at Star Supply, managers said.

George Durso, who works a sales counter where customers can make pickups starting at 7 a.m., has been with the company about 15 years. "To me, it's just a great place to work. I've learned a lot here. There's a lot of training," he said.

Customers may also make overnight pickups at a designated room that's got a surveillance system, or place orders around the clock on the company's Web site. Unless some information needs to be verified, the new facility allows Star Supply to store enough inventory to ship overnight orders the next morning.

"It's been a great 50 years. We're looking forward to 50 more," said Cohen, who has a wife, Peggy, and a daughter, Michelle. "We like to be a leader in what we do."

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