

Down to a Science

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Drycleaning can be difficult, but then, it isn't exactly rocket science. Chuck Horst should know. He's worked in both fields, after all.

While he grew up in a drycleaning family, Chuck initially wanted to be a physicist. He simply loved learning and could never get enough of it.

Chuck has earned B.S. degrees in both Physics and Math from Westminster College in Pennsylvania, and he also has completed studies for a Master's degree in Astronomy and Astrophysics at San Diego State University.

In the late 1970s, he began his career in the defense industry with contractor General Dynamics.

"I worked in the Materials Division doing materials testing and research," he recalled.

After three years he was hired for another job in the defense industry, but he is not permitted to say where. He enjoyed the science aspect considerably but not the atmosphere of secrecy.

"I can't tell you where I worked at that time," he said. "What I didn't like about it was the very high security things. I couldn't even wear a digital watch. You couldn't use a PDA. You can't share any information even though you're working with the same people on another project... it's all compartmentalized."

In the late 1980s, the defense industry crashed and Chuck found himself unemployed. He had mixed feelings about applying for another job in the defense industry, however.

"It's the height of inefficiency," he said. "I did enjoy the work, but there were projects that I was working on that were just being built a couple of years ago. It takes forever to really see the fruits of your labor when you're doing government-type work. I did get to work on the space shuttle and the Hubble telescope and things like that, so eventually those made it out."

As a temporary solution to being unemployed, Chuck started working for his father, John, at Margaret's Cleaners in La Jolla. About 22 years

later, he still hasn't sent out any resumes.

The former physicist made the transition over to business owner and he hasn't looked back since.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that Margaret's has seven Horst family members currently working for it.

"There's my mother, Barbara. She's the controller. She's in five to six days a week," he began. "My father's the chairman of the board. He's in three days a week. My uncle Fritz is the vice president of operations. He's in five days a week. I'm the president. I'm in six days a week. My brother Scott is vice president of sales. He's full-time. My sister Jan runs the bridal division, and now my wife Robin works pretty much full-time doing marketing research, building our database."

Those paying attention will notice there was no "Margaret" Horst mentioned in there. That would be because that is the name of the company's original founder, Margaret Clutter. She started the business as Margaret's Knit Blocking way back in 1953.

"She was a finisher at another cleaners in La Jolla and her husband had passed away and her son was a POW in the Korean War," Chuck explained. "She had to do something to get her mind off of that, so she started her own cleaners by herself. In the process of all of that, she became the little boutique cleaner in town with the excellent reputation."

For almost 35 years (and long after she was reunited with her son who returned home from Korea), Margaret Clutter excelled at everything from hand washing and knit blocking to stain removal and alterations.

Meanwhile, Chuck's parents lived in Ohio running Dale Cleaners successfully for over 34 years.

Prior to that, the Horst family could trace its roots in the drycleaning industry dating back to another couple of generations.

"My great grandfather used to do laundry delivery with a horse and carriage in East Liverpool, Ohio," Chuck said.



Chuck Horst
of Margaret's
Cleaners

"My grandfather and grandmother were in the cleaning business their whole lives in East Liverpool, and then they moved up to Newton Falls. Then, my father, at age 19, started his own drycleaning company with his best friend from grade school. He's been doing it all his life."

By 1987, John and Barbara Horst moved to California so they could be close to their grandchildren when they retired. However, they had one more drycleaning venture left in them.

"They wanted to buy a small cleaners," Chuck recalled. "They had 16 locations back in Ohio and definitely wanted to downsize here. But, Margaret didn't want to sell."

In order to win over Margaret's trust, John Horst worked at the business for free for six months until the 80-year-old plant owner decided to sell.

"She was the most frugal person we'd ever met," Chuck said. "Back in those days they had invoices that were two-part and three-part with the carbon. She ripped them apart and would make three invoices out of one. To tag clothes, she used little colored pieces of paper

and the staff had to use them eight times and cross the name out. Then it was OK to throw away the little square piece of paper.”

The cost cutting strategies worked. Margaret’s only needed about four employees for decades, but it was still considered a leading facility in La Jolla.

The Horsts simply hoped to carry on that tradition. Chuck and his uncle joined on as employees number five and six about a half year after John and Barbara bought the plant.

One big change the family implemented was to start doing almost all of the cleaning services on the premises, instead of farming it out to others.

Less than 20 years later, Margaret’s has expanded to include approximately 65 employees at four locations in San Diego and Orange Counties. They also have added routes that extend as far as Beverly Hills and Las Vegas.

“We’re a couture cleaner,” Chuck noted. “Certainly, there are more expensive ones than we are, but the number of pieces that we go through here... we’re probably the largest in the country. We do a lot of work for other cleaners across the country. We do their handbag cleaning for them. I don’t recommend people going into the handbag cleaning business unless they really, really do it right. We now have cleaned over 4,000. So, we’ve pretty much gotten it down to a science. But, it’s not the same as drycleaning. It’s dramatically different.”

To keep the work coming in, Margaret’s aggressively markets its services everywhere, near and far.

“We market to over 8,000 retailers across the country,” Chuck said. “We pick up and deliver from 180 stores weekly. This week, we got something from Nieman Marcus in Honolulu. We got something from Barneys in Philadelphia. We get a number of things from Canada. We get some things from London. We just shipped a wedding gown to Hong Kong.

Another one of the Horst family’s greatest strengths is that every member has a clearly defined role in the company. Chuck focusses on strategic planning and market development.

“I have a marketing research person on board,” he said. “I have a graphics designer

on board. We do our own data development. We do a lot of things a normal cleaner wouldn’t do.”

Margaret’s is a big advocate of industry and business associations, belonging to seven altogether, including Leading Cleaners International, which Chuck initially helped launch.

The company has also participated in many community support programs, which certainly has helped it generate publicity in magazines such as Reader’s Digest, Women’s Wear Daily and In Style.

Last year, Margaret’s participated in the Princess Project, collecting hundreds of prom dresses for area teenagers who could not afford them.

“We’ve had very good success with stores this year that donated overstock,” he said. “I’d say half the gowns we got were new.”

Though it is a rather large company, Margaret’s and the Horst family strive hard to continue offering a personal touch. At times, that means helping people through some emotionally distressing times.

About three years ago, a woman sent in several Civil War uniforms to be handled with care. However, an emergency suddenly cropped up.

“She called up and said, ‘I need a uniform back quickly because my brother is passing

away and he was a Civil War historian. I want to get one of the Civil War uniforms restored and sent back to him in Philadelphia.”

Chuck recalled that they were sent two different types of uniforms: blue coats and gray coats. He called back later on to see which one the 90-year old man preferred.

“We didn’t want to be held responsible for his last moment on Earth getting shipped the wrong side,” he said.

Sometimes, the emergencies stem from happier times, yet they are no less frenetic. One night while Chuck worked late, a frantic bride called from Honolulu and needed her badly damaged dress repaired in a hurry.

“This gown had shrunk in the bodice by three inches,” Chuck said. “It just reeked. She had gotten married and took it to the cleaners. She was on the island and was coming over to the states for a reception for family who couldn’t make it. We had six hours to alter the dress and get it nice and bright and smelling well again.”

It was, by no means, an easy fix, but it was quite a satisfying one.

“We literally had to sew in three inches of fabric so she could zipper this thing up. They had shrunk it that badly,” he added. “She was very happy when she picked it up.”##



Chuck pictured with the Civil War collection mentioned in this article

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