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Contact: Christopher Martin

O: (412) 749-9299

C: (412) 952-6332

E: cmartin@martinpublicrelations.com

Training and Guts Drive Mirgliotta

Began career as Ironworker Apprentice, now owns region's largest steel erector

CLEVELAND (January 8, 2009) Jim Mirgliotta became an ironworker apprentice at age 17.

At age 28, using the skills and contacts he'd gotten from the union and a 200-amp, hand-crank Lincoln welding machine, he formed his own business, Park Iron Erectors.

That first year, he and his wife, Bette, brought in \$75,000 worth of work.

This year, Forest City Erectors, the Twinsburg, Ohio, company the couple now owns, will turn \$32 million in business.

"I grew up in an era where, if your father was an ironworker, the sons usually followed where the father was," he said.

Mirgliotta's dad, who specialized in rebar, was an ironworker. So were his two older brothers.

In 1951, he joined them -- working as an ironworker apprentice for twenty-four months before becoming a journeyman.

In the mid-1950s, Mirgliotta began working for American Bridge Company -- at the time the largest steel erection company in the world. During his five years there, he studied the work being done around him, hoping to become an expert at it.

Daily, he took a small, flip-top spiral notebook with him to the job site -- training that he learned as an ironworker apprentice. In it, Mirgliotta recorded the project he was working, how big the crane was that was being used, how many workers were on-site and how many pieces of steel they put up. He also noted the size, height and weight of the building.

"I kept them for 10 years," he said. "I probably had a suitcase full of notebooks."

Tracking the work and resources that went into each job later taught Mirgliotta how to be a good estimator.

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That skill -- and the desire to be his own boss and guarantee himself 40 hours of work each week -- led Mirgliotta, on Nov. 11, 1959, to form Park Iron Erectors.

For the next 18 months, Mirgliotta focused primarily on miscellaneous jobs that didn't require a lot of people -- fabricating stairways, railings and fire escapes.

He had already made a name for himself in the business. To get more work, he simply knocked on doors and offered to put in a bid.

"I really worked on the reputation," he said. "It got me the next job and the next job.

"I think a lot of it was pure guts. When I look back today and think about all the challenges."

He didn't have much money -- the company started with \$750 in the bank. He was driving a 1948 Studebaker truck that he bought for \$250. It didn't have front fenders, so he fashioned his own out of galvanized window wells and then added on headlights he bought at a junkyard.

That first real piece of equipment, the hand-crank welding machine, he bought in a front yard.

"That's what we made work," he said.

Then in 1961, he got the chance to buy into Forest City Erectors.

He and Bette, who ran Forest City's office until 10 years ago, bought the company out entirely in 1970.

Through all the years before and since, Mirgliotta has used union ironworkers, rewarding the same group that helped him make his name in the business.

Today, Forest City has nearly 200 employees.

"I am proud to have such a strong relationship with Union Ironworkers," said Mirgliotta. "Without the training and skills these guys have, I don't think we would be as successful as we are today."

Over the past five decades, the company has worked on the stadiums where the Cleveland Browns and Pittsburgh Steelers play; they've done work for Ford Motor Co.; worked at the University of Notre Dame, and from 1966 to 1976 helped in the construction of 640 K-mart stores across the country. They are currently working on the 10-story county justice center in Cleveland.

At age 75, Mirgliotta and his wife just marked their 49th year in business together, and he still isn't even thinking about retiring.

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"I put my boots on and walk every level of the job," Mirgliotta said. "I talk to everyone who's working."

He remembers back to their first year in business as Park Iron Erectors, when he and his wife were thrilled to have cleared nearly \$10,000 for themselves.

"You can see the progression," he said proudly. "To think, it all started from a 17-year old ironworker."

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