

Philip Cohen named SBA Person of the Year



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By CORBIN KOTTMANN

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Cohen’s personal story began outside the business world, growing up in what he described as the violence of Chicago, Miami and Atlanta with an abusive father. Eventually, Cohen said, he was homeless and strung out on drugs. His life turned around after “an encounter with God,” in 1974.” He started attending a church and woodworking out of a neighbor’s pig pen.

“It was therapeutic,” he said. “That’s where it started, and I stayed with it over the years.”

Cohen then made contact with a man who taught him more about the woodworking craft, a gentleman who had been apprenticed to a German cabinet maker. For the next five years, he taught Cohen over the phone, their conversations lasting well past midnight as they discussed what Cohen called “the poetry” of woodworking. Cohen said that was when he started to really think like a craftsman.

At one point, the cabinet maker’s shop burned down, and the gentleman didn’t know if he could keep working without it. Through their conversations, Cohen witnessed the man discover that his craft wasn’t in his shop, but in his heart.

“That was the defining moment for both of us,” he said. “The best craftsman isn’t the one who has the best tools and the best equipment. It’s someone who can take whatever he’s got and make something beautiful out of it. That’s when I got the heart of a craftsman.” Cohen gathered this newfound heart, along with his ongoing passion, and took the first steps to create the company that stands today.

“One of the worst things that can happen to you in business is that you’re successful,” Cohen said, thinking back to when he and his family first started operating the business. The family was a part of a denomination with certain tax exemptions, allowing them to work relatively cheaply in the beginning.

They eventually left that denomination, entering what Cohen called “the real world.” While this may have been a harsh reality after their beginning, the family overcame it, keeping their character and integrity above the water.

“Once your character caves in, you’re done,” Cohen said.

Years later, Cohen architecture stands as a successful business where many can build a new start. Upon receiving the award from the SBA, Cohen said he was learning how to deal with it. Cohen said he’s decided the best way is to stand up and say thank you, and then go right back to work, and keep his company dedicated to the quality of work of character they are known for. This character comes from several sources of inspiration, but Cohen said there is one in particular that deserves thanks.

“I was 16 and I grew up in an abusive home, and I had one uncle who really cared about me,” said Cohen. “I was working in a store and my mother called me at work one day and told me my uncle had cancer, and he was going to die. I went back to the stock room and I just sat down and started convulsively sobbing. This man, his name was Mr. Baldi, he came back... and just stood there with me, put his hand on my shoulder and comforted me.”

Cohen said that when he was faced with starting a company, he wasn’t sure how to be a manager, but that event came to mind, and shaped how his company grew and continues to operate.

“The way I lead people, it comes from that one event. If I ever meet him again, I want to thank him. If there’s anyone who should get credit, it’s him.”

Cohen Architectural Woodworking is currently working on their succession plan, paving the way for Cohen’s children to inherit the company, making sure the family business built on so much love can continue into a legacy.