Iron Man

EDWARD HEFFNER BS’68

For a company that has been around for more than a century, Edward Heffner’s family-operated business remains strong as iron.

Empire City Iron Works, founded by Heffner’s grandfather, an immigrant who fled anti-Semitism in Austria, has been providing steel stairs, ironwork, and structural steel since 1904. Business has been so steady, thanks to repeat clients, that the company doesn’t even have a sales force or website.

“People trust us,” says Heffner, co-owner of the Long Island City-based company. “We deliver the quality our clients need when they need it and solve their thorniest technical problems.”

Many NYC buildings have used Empire City, including the United Nations, the Metropolitan Opera, and the new Yankee Stadium. Its current project list includes the new Strand Theatre in Brooklyn; World Trade Center Towers 2, 3, and 4; 9/11 Memorial; the Vehicle Security Center; and the new Police Academy in Queens.

Heffner’s grandfather, father, and uncle, all civil engineers, worked at Empire. His father, Simon, required that involved family members be engineers.

“He would say, ‘I don’t want poets in this business. They lack the technical training for what we do.’”

Soon after graduating from Columbia Engineering in 1968, Heffner joined the company. After his father’s death in 1975, he became a co-owner with his brother, at age 29. He admits the responsibilities were “a bit scary and difficult,” but now, it’s “just like breathing. Engineering is in my blood.”

As a kid, Heffner accompanied his father to job sites. Whenever he returns to the Metropolitan Opera, he remembers those days.

“We did the framing for the big windows in the front of the opera house,” says Heffner. “I remember the beautiful panels that were carved in place by Italian craftsmen, the only people in the world able to do that kind of work.”

His ironworkers, like those craftsmen, possess unique skills, and Heffner has a deep appreciation for what he calls “dying” art forms. “It is difficult now to find people who can weld, burn, and fit things together,” says Heffner.

Equally serious, he feels, is the scarcity of engineers today, which Heffner blames on the pay disparity that has pushed them to Wall Street. Heffner points to an increase in cost overruns and delays as a consequence of having too few competent, technically trained engineers available for major projects.

“I am hoping that a silver lining of the financial crisis, given layoffs and bonus cuts on Wall Street, will be more talented students attending engineering school and joining the profession.”

He chose Columbia Engineering for its reputation and location. “I had a lot of good professors,” says Heffner, “such as René Testa. He never laughed then, but now he’s one of the most jocular people I know.”

Heffner has always supported the School. He has funded the Heffner Laboratory for Hydrologic Research and the Heffner Biomedical Imaging Lab and is currently funding the renovation of the student lounge on the sixth floor of Mudd.

“SEAS taught me a lot and gave me a terrific experience,” says Heffner. “It’s important for me to give back.”