

O'Gormans

THREE GENERATIONS



THREE GENERATIONS OF ONE FAMILY HAVE BUILT O'GORMANS INTO A SIGNIFICANT FORCE IN WINDOW FURNISHINGS IN AUSTRALIA. DAWN ADAMS REPORTS.

The original founder of O'Gormans traded cigarettes to secure the timber needed to build blinds when he first started in business in 1947, shortly after World War II had ended.

His grand-daughter, Donna Cully, a third generation family member who has continued the business' legacy, recounts the story.

"The American ships would offload timber onto the beach," she says. "My grandfather [Leo O'Gorman] gave cigarettes to the sailors to drop the timber off at his place."

Leo O'Gorman had become involved in blind making as a hobby; he was among the first to produce timber cedar blinds, made by hand in a shed in the backyard of his home in St Kilda. That original handcrafted timber venetian blind was sold for 84 shillings at the time, the equivalent of around \$8.40 today.

By 1960, when Leo moved into new premises at 836 Sydney Road in the Melbourne suburb of North Coburg, his son Dennis had already joined the business. A tradition was founded then, which continues today with each new generation: Dennis was not allowed to join the company immediately after he finished school.

"He was expected to do something else first, so he did an apprenticeship in carpentry," Donna says.

Soon after he completed the apprenticeship, he became involved in the family business at the original North Coburg site, which was extremely compact, at just nine feet wide, and very deep, a space that Dennis claims was "like working in a submarine".

When orders for larger blinds were placed, Dennis would have to take each blind outside to turn it around and then bring it back into the store to be completed.

The test of time

Just two years ago, a customer brought in one of Dennis's original blinds for repair, the first such attention it had required since being produced more than 40 years ago. Donna confirms that Dennis would have made that blind with the help of his mother, her grandmother, Valerie, when he was first learning the trade. She laughs that the cut of the blind went "completely against the grain", however, the quality of the workmanship was outstanding: "it just needed new tape".

"When they first came to North Coburg, it was all paddocks," Donna says. "There was not even a road out the front, and as a young girl, I used to come in on a Saturday to earn some money and we'd have a big bonfire for the rubbish, papers and bits and pieces, to clear up the place."



Left: Donna Cully and brother Craig O'Gorman in the company showroom.



Right: A family business: Dennis, Leo and Craig O'Gorman.

Bottom Right: The original O'Gormans showroom.

The business later expanded to include curtain making after Dennis bought 10 rolls of fabric, which he stored in a front window for six months until Isabelle Harris dropped by to offer to make curtains for the growing enterprise. She continues to make the company's curtains today, 30 to 35 years after she first started. Donna says that the gentleman who sold her father those rolls of fabric, Noel Hude, is also still involved in the industry.

A niche showroom

Today, the business operates a quadruple fronted showroom, which extends from the original site. The company has developed this space by purchasing neighbouring premises over the years, including a fish and chip shop, which had a concrete floor 100mm higher than usual to ensure that it could hold the containers of oil.

"There are a lot of little niches in our showroom, it's different to other shops around," Donna says.

Despite having worked in the business from a young age, Donna was also expected to try something different after she finished school before she could enter the family business.

"I was not allowed to work in the business straight away," she says.

"I worked with Telstra for nine years, had a child and then worked with Dad three days a week. Now, I'm working six days a week and loving it."

Family business

Her brother, Craig, whose responsibilities include commercial, motorisation and decision making, completed a carpentry apprenticeship, like his father, after finishing school.

She points to her father's and Craig's carpentry skills as being invaluable. "There's probably not a window that we couldn't put a pelmet on," she says.

Donna looks after the upmarket residential sector, upholstery, consultancy and





administration. With seven children between the two siblings, Donna says she's hopeful that a fourth generation will one day continue the family's corporate history.

"From the day I turned 14, I worked here every Saturday and so did my brother," she says.

"My mother Valerie worked here as well, doing the bookwork and tidying up the showroom."

The 'room doctor'

One of Donna's initiatives at the company is DC Interiors, which offers a 'room doctor' service to help guide customers through their decorating options.

"Window furnishing is still our main business, but there are people who are time poor, who don't want to go to 10 stores to complete a room or a home," she says.

"With the consultancy business, I do interior design consulting for clients, whether residential or business."

She credits a Sydney fabric company with having the original idea to charge for this type of service, and claims that this practice is gaining greater acceptance among consumers.

"We still prefer people to come into the showroom first to get a feel for our business, but some people don't have the time," she says.

Donna has learned that people accept paying for this type of service, especially as they are often spending significant sums, sometimes up to \$50,000, to decorate various rooms with items like window furnishings, carpet, paint, wallpaper and more.

"An incentive is that if they decide to go with us for the order, they get the amount refunded from that consultation," she says.

She describes the ethos behind the family business as "old-fashioned", offering that term to reflect a positive caring stance for customers and staff working in the business. Dennis is still involved in the business, but handed over its primary care to Craig and Donna this year.

"We don't ask staff to do 10 deals a day or ring 20 clients daily," she says. "All of our staff have been with us for 22 years; we have one new person and only two staff have left, one retired and the other moved to the country."

Customers often get to know the person they're dealing with at O'Gormans, with many opportunities for installation by the same person who measures and quotes for a job.

New Pallet

Browns, lattes, aubergines and translucent blinds may be on the way out of fashion, according to Donna Cully from O'Gormans.

"People are more interested in going to back to a yellow colour palette," she says.

"The days of coffee may finally be coming to a close and we're going back 20 to 25 years to a palette that includes pale lime green, pale pink and apricot."

She also notes a trend away from translucent blinds, with customers seeking curtains as replacements, a move away from a colder effect to create a warmer inviting setting.

"Translucent blinds are still sought after for areas like family rooms with a casual indoor/outdoor feel," she says. "But for the main traditional living area, curtains and swags or curtains and pelmets are increasing in popularity."

