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CORNERSTONE

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A man in a light yellow polo shirt and dark shorts stands on a stone patio next to a swimming pool. He is holding a small, scruffy dog. The pool has a waterfall feature on the left. In the background, there is a hot tub, lounge chairs, and a large patio umbrella. The entire scene is enclosed in a black metal frame with a glass roof.

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Cover Story

For Over 27 Years, Bill Hanson Continues to Make Waves in the Pool Business

BY DAVID PEADEN

As a 13 year old, Gulf Coast Pool and Spa's Bill Hanson worked as a dishwasher for a local restaurant in Bridgeport, Ohio,

a small town located on the banks of the Ohio River and across from Wheeling, West Virginia. It didn't matter to him that he had to be 16 to legally work, Hanson wanted to earn money, and he liked his job.

"Sometimes when an inspector came around," said Hanson, "I would have to hide outside so the restaurant owner wouldn't get fined!"

Bridgeport provided a solid backdrop to raise a family and to root for local sports heroes who excelled at the small Bridgeport High School. Hanson followed the careers of such icons as 1964 and 1968 United States Olympic Team wrestler Bobby Douglas. NBA Basketball Hall of Famer John Havlicek, who competed for 16 seasons with the Boston Celtics, winning eight NBA titles. "They named the Bridgeport High School's gymnasium after Havlicek," said Hanson. And there are the baseball brothers

of Joe and Hall of Famer Phil Niekro, who are the winningest brother combination in MLB history. "Phil learned how to throw his famous knuckleball while at Bridgeport High School," said Hanson.

After graduating from high school, during the Vietnam era, Hanson signed up for a six year commitment in the Navy Reserve. Before being shipped out one year later, Hanson took a job with high-end clothier called Phil-More. "It was a lot like the Ordon's store that used to be in downtown Pensacola," said Hanson. "I didn't know at the time that it would pay off for me in my future."

After a couple years on the USS Independence as a Chaplain's Assistant with tours of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, Hanson met his wife and Pensacola native, Jan, in Norfolk, Virginia. The two moved to Pensacola in 1972. While Hanson was continuing his service in the Navy Reserve, he used his experience in the clothing business to gain employment at JC Penny.

"I was working at JC Penny and Ellison Field was set to close," said Hanson. "I decided after seven years in the Reserve, it was time to move on."

There's a story behind how Hanson landed the job at JC Penny. At the time, the manager said he wasn't hiring until later in the

year. Hanson, being persistent, said he would work for free until he could be hired. Impressed with his work ethic, after a week, Hanson was hired selling men's suits for \$1.60 an hour. Hanson's original goal was to get into the management program so he pursued a business management degree at Pensacola Junior College at night. During that time, Hanson realized that he was making a lot more money selling

Jensen would work in the field, installing pools and equipment.

"It's not very often that an owner of a pool company is in your backyard doing the labor," said Hanson. "We've been business partners for almost 25 years, and usually that isn't the case with partners. But we work well together. I couldn't do his job and he couldn't do mine, so we really compliment one another."

They've grown Gulf Coast Pools & Spa from a \$200,000 - \$300,000 business to a \$2 million to \$3 million dollar business during the building boom. Although things have slowed down in the economy, Hanson said that his margins remain strong. Hanson says that when a homeowner wants a pool, all they put down is \$1,000. When the pool is finished, Hanson then bills for the cost of the pool.

"A lot of homeowners have paid for 60 percent of a pool, and they don't even have a hole in the backyard," said Hanson. "We are a debt free company which allows the homeowner to have the faith in us that we are going to do whatever we say we are going to do. Plus, they don't have to come out of their pocket with upfront costs."

Whether it is a building a new pool, replacing a liner or a pump, Hanson and Jensen say that they pride themselves on quality. They shoot straight with customers about what needs to be done and sometimes are called after another pool contractor wasn't as worried about quality.

"After Hurricane Ivan, we saw many, many pools collapse," said Hanson. "It is a shame it happens, but if the pool was constructed properly in the first place, it would not have happened."

Over the years, Hanson and Jensen have seen a lot of changes in the pool industry. For example, diving boards and slides are not being installed anymore thanks to insurance companies not covering the exposure. Homeowners are opting for waterfalls and other amenities with featured lighting. Hanson says that salt pools are becoming more and more popular because it's a natural cleaning process and it's much cheaper than the chemical, Chlorine.

When he's not working, Hanson enjoys spending time with his wife, daughter and two teenaged granddaughters. All and all, he is still the same person from Bridgeport who used small town principles to guide him through the Navy, retail sales and the ever-changing pool industry. Through it all, he has no regrets. "In business, we are always learning," said Hanson. "But that's what makes it fun too!"



men's suits than the men's suit department manager. Even though he obtained his degree, he continued to work in men's clothing until he left the company in 1983, venturing into the swimming pool business.

Hanson's neighbor and best friend, Jim Looft, owned Gulf Coast Pool & Spa and had built a good, reputable business located off of the old two-lane Creighton Road. Looft hired Hanson as a salesman where he learned all he could about the pool business. His hard work and understanding paid off in July of 1987 when Hanson, and his business partner, Gary Jensen, bought Gulf Coast Pool and Spa.

"I quickly paid attention to how Jim was running his business," said Hanson. "While it was a good company, I knew that when and if I bought the business, that I would do things a little differently."

One of the first things Hanson and Jensen decided to do was to be hands on owners. Hanson said that previously, Gulf Coast Pool & Spa hired subcontractors to do a lot of work. Even though the subs did good work, certain customer service details fell through the cracks. Hanson and Jensen decided that they needed to be hands-on owners by hiring key employees and training them to construct and maintain pools and systems. Hanson would be in charge of customer service and sales, and