

Title: *Morton Grove Supply: Family Ties and the Pipeline to Success*

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The team at Morton Grove Supply may not be the best-known plumbing suppliers in the Chicagoland area, but they've certainly earned their reputation for quality service and no small amount of charm.

Founded in 1951 by WWII veteran and valve manufacturer Ed Toton, Sr. and local plumbing supply salesman Tom Cannata, Morton Grove Supply came from humble, straightforward beginnings. According to the current company president, and Toton's eldest son, Ed Toton, Jr., the men used their respective plumbing expertise to provide their customers with affordable, quality products and the market know-how to get projects up and running.

In those early days, their business was run out of a small storefront near downtown Morton Grove and the pair relied upon their wits and ingenuity to make the business work, renting garage space from several local homeowners to store overhead and using a repurposed funeral hearse for a delivery truck. "I'm sure most businesses have stories of humble beginnings but not many like this," Ed, Jr. acknowledges with the ease of a man secure in the legacy and the bright future of the company he helms. This ease is hard-earned.

Starting work for his father's company as an early 20-something in 1978, one year before his father suddenly passed away, Ed, Jr. reflects on his decision fondly, recalling how working alongside his father strengthened their bond, "It was a good year and we became very close... we got to bond." Toton, Jr.'s aren't the only family ties that bind at Morton Grove Supply. These days, the whole business is a family affair.

After Cannata's passing in 1975, and Toton, Sr.'s passing shortly thereafter, Toton's widow Evelyn took up the mantle, buying out Cannata's share and enlisting several of her children to come on board and learn to run the business.

"My siblings, Margaret and Bill joined the company in quick succession. All three of us were in our early 20's, so there was a huge learning curve," admits Ed, Jr., though the business found its feet soon enough. This time, under the watchful eye of his mother Evelyn, Ed, Jr. assumed the position of company president, daughter Margaret took up the role of vice president and bookkeeper, while middle son Bill filled the role of vice president and operations manager. With their core team in place, ready to learn on the fly, the storefront operation grew to a well-oiled, multi-generational family operation with a lengthy roster of dedicated customers.

For the Toton's, success comes from encouraging growth and forward-thinking while taking care to honor the traditions and tenets that built their successes from the start. "You bust your ass because your father started this thing a long time ago and you hope to see it hit a 100th year anniversary," Bill muses, highlighting the longevity the 69-year-old business already enjoys. As Ed, Jr. sees it, Morton Grove Supply's history is family history, calling the business "an extension of how we

perceive ourselves. [We do it] with pride, not just as a job to do till 4 pm.” Unsurprisingly, the new generation of Toton family employees/soon-to-be owners agree.

Now moving toward the third generation of Toton ownership and management, Mike Leonard, warehouse manager and son of VP Margaret Toton, sees the importance of the business’ family ties in all aspects of Morton Grove Supply’s operation and future growth. As his mother Margaret remarked, “a family business works only if you have a family that works!” and this is certainly no work-shy family. For Margaret’s son Mike, work and family are sides of the same coin. “Family values have become our business values,” Mike explains, “We believe in being fair, honest and helpful to our customers in the same way you would to family.”

This sentiment is echoed by everyone on the close-knit staff of nine, all of whom seem related, if not by blood than by the strength of their commitment to one another. From Andrew Zabkowski, a long-time counter sales employee, to Elias Castillo-Bahena in the warehouse, each employee is treated like family. Of course, there are tangible rewards, like a generous benefits package, including total healthcare coverage and 401k contributions, but it is through the more abstract displays of kinship, like a weekly, home-cooked company-wide lunch, that the unique magic of Morton Grove Supply becomes clear.

To counter manager Charlie Toton, son of VP Bill Toton, the Morton Grove Supply family-focused culture not only fosters a sense of pride, but it makes working for a living bearable. “Coming into work doesn't feel like punching into your shift,” he says, “Everyone knows everyone, [so work] is a second home that we also work at.”

Employees aren’t the only ones to reap the benefit of the close-knit environment. Whether picking an order from the warehouse or taking after-hours customer calls, each customer Morton Grove Supply serves is treated like a Toton. This high level of attention and dedicated service is a mainstay for Morton Grove Supply, and the reason customers keep coming back. “With hardly any turnover, a customer can deal with the same person for decades,” says Mike. From Charlie’s perspective at the counter, the Morton Grove Supply family culture also means that the sales experience also includes support, “Not only are the customers coming in and seeing friendly familiar faces, they also have the support of outstanding customer service that will help not only fulfilling an order but will also help solve problems.”

With backgrounds in service plumbing and information technology, respectively, Charlie and Mike know very well the importance of problem-solving, especially as it relates to their transition into company management. “We both started from the bottom... the very bottom,” Mike says with a laugh, “We both spent summers sweeping the warehouse as teenagers and moved our way up to picking orders and up from there. There were no free rides. That organic growth gave us both a unique perspective of how every aspect of the business is run.”

For Mike, this means making sure the business operates efficiently, using innovation and technologies to ensure productivity and profitability. “We’re very focused on achieving a perfectly accurate inventory in real-time,” Mike says, “We want to know every single item we have in stock, down to the nut and bolt.” This fastidiousness reaps real rewards, allow for only limited backorders, a killer for a plumber.

In addition, Mike's work as Warehouse Manager has also yielded sales innovations, like a 24/7 customer access area, where, with a unique pin code entry, customers can access a well-lit, stocked and monitored supply room to pick up last-minute or emergency supplies at their convenience. This is the innovation that sets Morton Grove Supply apart from their competitors and big-box retailers, and the innovation the new generation of Morton Grove Supply management has plans to explore.

Speaking of his and Mike's association with tech-savvy millennials, Charlie sees innovation and technology as tools to elevate the customer experience. "We understand the ease of using technology and how important that is to the end-user," Charlie says, while being quick to point out that balance is key. "The younger generations know the need for innovation, [but] there's an appreciation and understanding of tradition and why it's important to not only us but to our customers."

While a unique mix of tradition and innovation has spelled success for Morton Grove Supply, their fourteen-year IMARK membership has also played an important role. "It's been a Godsend for us," said Ed, Sr. "That rebate gives us that little bit of breathing room we need and meeting the contacts is huge. It provides great opportunities to network. I give IMARK all kinds of credit for our success."

When asked how the next generation of leaders at Morton Grove Supply are being equipped to succeed in managing, both Mike and Charlie are quick to point out the value in starting from the bottom and working upward. For both men, putting in the man-hours and experiencing the business from multiple angles has translated into skilled, confident managers with a clear respect for their workplace's traditions and culture and a genuine sense of excitement at spearheading the company into the future. It's clear that for the Morton Grove Supply family, there's much success awaiting this succession.