

by Heather Mundt

An Industrious Family Legacy

History and heritage define a retail culture, shape a business' focus.



WHERE IS IT?

Along the bustling Silas Deane Highway in Rocky Hill, Conn., about 15 minutes from Hartford. For 31 years, the bridge/high-end boutique has attracted local customers as well as those from Boston and New York City, just a two-hour's drive.

This family-owned business of Italian origins houses two levels of bridal fashion.

The Garofalos brought business vision and dreams from Italy to the United States.

The Garofalo family members, proprietors of Mariella Creations, take great pride in their more than 30-year success in the bridal industry. But to gain a sense of the history leading up to that achievement, you need to go back a few years. Five generations, to be exact.

"It really dates back to my great-great grandmother overseas," says Mariella Garofalo-Perna, Mariella Creations president and namesake.

Her maternal great-great-grandmother was a seamstress in the 1800s in Sassano, Italy, a small town near Naples' southern port. In those days, Perna says, when a family's daughter was approximately 7 years old, they would

start a trousseau that included hand towels, various outfits and, eventually, a wedding gown.

"They would employ Grandma, and that's really how the business started," she says. By the time Perna's great-grandmother took over the business, it had grown large enough to open a store. She sold sundry items like sugar and fabric, in addition to offering seamstress services, and lived behind the actual store.

In the early 1900s, when Perna's grandmother, Filomena, was a young girl, convention dictated females attend school in town. But she went away to learn the trade at a school in Naples.

"That was unheard of," Perna says. "You didn't do that, but my

great-grandmother wanted her to learn how to do embroidery," specifically on a machine.

Once she graduated, Filomena returned home to the family business. But she "picked up the business one step more," Perna says, becoming among the first in town to purchase a loom to make sweaters, and creating fine goods like women's nylons, embroidery, linens and tapestries.

By the 1950s, Perna's relatives had begun immigrating to the U.S., and the family decided to close the store and reopen it in the States. With that also traveled the legacy of these ambitious, strong-willed women, planting firmly in Hartford, Conn.

**Leaving the Family Business;
Carving a Unique Niche**

The family's first American business was Gigliello's, a cobbler shop her grandfather opened in Hartford in 1953. He had saved enough money to send for his family by 1958, when the family established Filomena's Dressmaking. The business, which Perna's grandmother and mother, Antonietta, ran in the basement of the living quarters behind the cobbler shop, achieved success by word of mouth.

But it had always been Antonietta's dream to run her own business. She had learned her sewing and skills at her mother's side and honed her talents at a

design school in Rome. She knew she could make a business work.

Eight years after marrying Perna's father, Antonio Garofalo, in 1962, Antonietta's dream became a reality. In 1970, when Perna was 7 and Antonio Jr. only a year old, they took a leap of faith, sold their home, and purchased the building that houses Mariella Creations.

"Everybody thought my parents were nuts," Perna says. Back then, she says, the Silas Deane Highway was merely a beach route, not exactly in the heart of a city like Hartford. "My parents were so sure of themselves. They just had a good feeling that this was the right thing to do."

The building was also leased to two tenants, but it wasn't long before the Garofalos' business inhabited both spaces. They first sold custom dresses then added sports wear, suits, dresses and other clothing items. Antonietta soon began making wedding gowns, a business that mushroomed so quickly she began eliminating sportswear and clothing to focus on bridal. She started traveling to New York to purchase wedding gowns, trips that were the beginnings of Perna's fashion education.

"Here's this little 8-year-old girl going to the showroom, and I was just fascinated and amazed," she says. Antonietta used those outings to teach her daughter buying fundamentals. "She trained me from a very young age how to buy in quantity and different styles, just right from the very beginning."

After completing studies in fashion merchandising and business administration in 1982, she returned to the store to manage buying duties and sales staff. Antonietta ran the alterations department, and husband Antonio managed bookkeeping and day-to-day business affairs.

Today, Mariella Creations flourishes under the same family solidarity. In addition to mother and daughter, Perna's husband, Raffaele, now assumes his father-in-law's duties since Antonio's retirement a year ago; and Perna's sister-in-law, Dora, manages the bridesmaids department. And when customers need tuxedos, the staff sends them only four buildings down to Antonio Jr.'s store, Formals By Antonio.

**Philosophies for a Thriving,
Reputable Family Business**

Mariella Creations' sterling reputation was built on solid fashion knowledge and honest business practices. Thirty-one years later, they continue to thrive by distinguishing themselves as a couture salon that caters to high-end customers.

"The bridal business, to make it suc-

The family took a leap of faith, sold their home, and purchased the building.



A sliding, mirrored door rests open to reveal an array of wedding gown choices.



Staff Photo: (seated, left to right) Thao Degree, Melissa Burns, Mariella Garofalo-Perna, Antonietta Garofalo, Dora Garofalo, Phylisse Bowen, Nereida Hoxha; (center row, standing left to right) Dora Giannitti, Margaret Karpowicz, Maria Semeao, Sofia Silluzio, Rosa Signorello, Adriana Defilippo, Susan Cattanio, Linda Angellico, Kathy MacBryde; (top row, standing left to right) Irene Tybor, Sonya Ostiguy, Aneta Wrzeszcz, Maria Chrzanowski, Nella Pskowski, Mary Morrissey, Ramona Puchalski; (not pictured) Maria Miano and Frances Tedeschi.

cessful, is hands on," she says. Successful business owners cannot be "behind closed doors," Perna says. Consequently, Perna or her mother strive to see every bride at least once during the fitting process. "They love that. They know that when they have a problem, they can talk to one of the owners."

One of her mother's philosophies is "know how to do everything," from taking out the trash to pulling apart a dress for alterations. Not only does it solidify Perna's management abilities, but it also fosters respect among her staff members.

"They know that if I ask them to do

something, that I would've done it myself," Perna says. "They've seen me do it."

"The majority of our full-time people have been with us for many

years," she says, citing one seamstress who recently retired after more than 20 years. "Our employees are our family."

Both Perna and her mother agree their family-business achievements result from allowing one another to work independently.

"We all have our own job," Antionetta says in a pleasant Italian accent that's as thick as Bolognese sauce. "Nobody's going to come say to me, 'You did it wrong.' I don't go to Mariella and say, 'You did it wrong.'"

"We're very fortunate because family businesses are extremely difficult," Perna says. "We don't mix in each other's business. That's why we work so well together."



Family portraits, placed on Perna's great-grandmother's sewing machine, reflect a sense of store history.



Mariella's Creations refers grooms to the nearby family tuxedo business, *Formals by Antonio*.

The original basement-run business blossomed by word-of-mouth referrals.

Inside Mariella Creations: Old World Sophistication

Renovated four years ago from the outside in, Mariella Creations' decor evokes the old world European sophistication that embodies the family's history. The color palette is elegantly simple, with walls and flooring in hues of beige and cream, with hints of gold and silver. Elegant tapestries and several oil paintings adorn the walls throughout the store; gold-framed authentic 1920s wedding photos — bought at antique shops — hang in the fitting and dressing-room areas. Storewide, hundreds of thank-you notes from customers are displayed collage-like in gold frames.

On the first level of the 6,000-square-foot building are the bridesmaids, prom and special-occasion dresses. The second level houses the store's piece de resistance: a bridal showroom, which the family freshly renovated just two years ago.

When brides enter the main showroom, they'll see an illuminated space with cream walls, hardwood floors, and a floral rug of green, beige and mauve.

Corinthian pillars are mixed among elegant furniture and mannequins displaying gowns. Next to one mannequin is a desk constructed of the wrought-iron base from her great-grandmother's sewing machine and a glass tabletop. Along the walls are mirrored sliding

glass doors, behind which hang approximately 700 wedding gowns.

"You don't see the merchandise really," Perna says, save for the two mannequins and a few dresses hung on brass hooks. "Then (the consultant) opens all those doors, and you just see

hundreds of gowns."

There are four walls behind the main showroom's mirrored doors, each lined with more mirrored, closet doors.

When each slides back, a rack is revealed that's incorporated into the wall, resembling a closet. On those racks hang gowns that have been grouped by similar styles. For example, behind one closet door are strapless gowns, long sleeves behind another. The consultant guides the bride through the display area then places her choices into one of five private dressing rooms, each decorated in a subtle creams and beige.

"We didn't want the elegance of the store to take away from what (the bride is) trying on," Perna says. The rooms contain a pedestal near three, gold-framed mirrors, one attached to the wall and two free standing that form a three-way mirror effect. The dressing rooms are large enough to accommodate a bridal party, so a stylish partition stands in each room to provide privacy. Sales consultants provide a petticoat and bra, and the bride is ready for gowns.

Solid fashion knowledge and honest business practices back the store's reputation.



Entering the store, customers receive a carefully crafted first impression of order, taste and quality.



Colorful merchandise makes an effective presentation against subtle natural tones with hints of gold.

Quality, Efficient Service Promotes Retail Achievement

The staff at Mariella Creations knows its customer is the one who desires "the exclusive gown," Perna says. That means when the bride walks in, "She wants to be catered to."

Perna's staff experiences rigorous training to ensure the bride gets exactly what she wants. For example, although each of the 10 seamstresses was already skilled in the trade before being hired, all also had to be trained by Antonietta to meet her high-quality standards.

In addition, each of Perna's 10 sales consultants has endured thorough training beginning "from the first floor up." Although the first level offers full service, Perna typically wants staff to perfect sales skills there before becoming a bridal-gown consultant. It's there that Perna teaches staff how to feel com-



Family Photo: (seated) Antonietta Garafalo, Antonio Garafalo, Sr.; (standing, left to right) Raffaele Perna, Mariella Garafalo-Perna, Dora Garafalo and Antonio Garafalo Jr.

fortable and learn the merchandise and terminology.

A new consultant must study a notebook filled with everything from store policies to vocabulary to methods for ordering dresses. Perna unofficially quizzes that employee on aspects of that notebook, and role-plays with her until she's comfortable enough to handle the sales floor alone.

The store offers wide variety in the high-end price points. Special-occasion dresses range from \$400 to \$1,500; bridesmaids' gowns run from \$180 to \$400; and wedding dresses range from \$900 to \$7,000. (Most start at \$1,500.) For customers who want the service but can't afford those prices, they can visit Mariella's Attic in the top level of Formals By Antonio. The 1,500-square-foot store sells discontinued — and therefore discounted — merchandise,

from flower girl dresses to designer wedding gowns.

The store provides a one-stop shopping experience, stocking shoes, slippers, undergarments, handbags, jewelry and other accessories. "This way we'll coordinate everything for them," Perna says. "The girls are in their careers, and they're busy. They like the idea that they're going to just come here and do it all."

Consultant's deal gently, yet honestly with brides to make sure they're choosing the most flattering gowns, not the most expensive.

"We try as best as we can to make (brides) feel like they're the only person in the store at that moment," Perna says. "It's not the almighty dollar. It's really making people happy."

So what would the women of generations past think if they saw Mariella

Creations today?

"We always had businesses that were successful," Antonietta says. "It's just normal." After five generations of business success, it's only "normal" they'd expect nothing less.

Perna quizzes employees on all the key aspects of product and service training.

Most Memorable Moment

Perna can recall several memorable career moments, but she says 2003 stands out as a banner year. Several local celebrities from area news stations, including two news anchors engaged to each other, sought out Mariella Creations to fulfill their wedding needs. WNBA star Rebecca Lobo also purchased everything there for her wedding, including tuxedos from Antonio's store. The Connecticut Sun player was not only a standout because she was a celebrity but because she was so tall, requiring a custom gown for her 6-foot-4-inch frame. "She was such a wonderful, pleasant person," Perna says.

The store received extensive media attention from local media and newspapers including the *New York Times*, which attracted numerous customers. Several of those women told Perna: "Everything they wrote about your store is really true."

"And that made us feel very good," she says. The publicity both boosted traffic and validated the staff's hard work. Sure, the store has received thousands of thank-you notes throughout the years. But Perna says that the media attention helps confirm her customers' endorsements. "It makes you feel good."