





Ron Wanek

ASHLEY FURNITURE, ARCADIA WISCONSIN

**Ron Wanek's
Midwestern
roots and work
ethic, combined
with abundant
artistic talent,
have helped
assure that
Ashley is seated
at the top of
the furniture
industry**

**By Tiffany
Hamburger**

To observe that Ron Wanek is a successful businessman is to state the obvious. He's the former CEO and current chairman of the board for privately held Ashley Furniture Industries Inc., a company he has led to become the number-one furniture retailer in the U.S. He's on the 2008 *Forbes* 400 list and is exceptionally devoted to his business. But for Wanek, business and success are inseparable from his background and philosophy. He's a businessman with a multi-faceted life. Successful? Yes. But typical? Definitely not.

For all the ways in which he transcends the norm, however, Wanek has no interest in complicating what should be straightforward and simple. Raised on a dairy farm in Minnesota, he learned early on that hard work and paying close attention get results. "One thing that agriculture teaches you about is timing," he says. "If you don't know when to do the work—planting, taking care, harvesting—you will be severely punished by not getting a yield. And business isn't any different in that regard."

Wanek attributes this experience to giving him the ability to work harder than most others were willing to do. He's never forgotten the importance of that lesson in his business. In fact, he figures that the most important factor to his business' success is encouraging the right attitude, both in management and in his employees. "You hire for attitude and train for skill," he says, adding that the right attitude, as he sees it, is "wanting to produce a quality product, caring about the customer and being willing to change."

While Wanek says he always desired to own his own business, he took the apprenticeship process very seriously and was com-

mitted to learning the ropes before leaping. Prior to entering the furniture business, he manufactured electronics cabinets. "I was fortunate to work for some good mentors," he says. "They taught me all aspects of the business—design, administrative, engineering, production."

This total immersion served him well, he says, because when the opportunity to get into the furniture-manufacturing business arose, he was well prepared, especially in those early days. "We started out with just a few employees, so if you didn't know everything you needed to know, you wouldn't be successful."

Although the Ashley Furniture name has been in existence since 1945, the Ashley that people know today came about through a merger, when the company Wanek helped found in 1970, Arcadia Furniture, merged with Ashley in 1976. Those early years were not easy ones, Wanek says, but through that early struggle, the seeds of the company's innovation—and success—were planted.

"In 1970, everything was made in the U.S., with a lot of good suppliers in the industry. In order to get the business, you had to be somewhat less expensive or you had to have a unique design," Wanek explains. "I would call on a lot of accounts, one of them being Nebraska Furniture Mart. My friend [there] said, 'You gotta do something different. There's no reason for me to buy from you. You're maybe a little bit cheaper, but I'm not going to change. I'm buying from somebody now that's doing the job for me.' So therein came the innovation," Wanek says. "You had to come up with unique designs that gave the dealer a reason to buy your furniture—and we've operated on that philosophy since 1970."

“I’m not sure what caused the dinosaurs’ extinction, but you have to change constantly or you’ll become obsolete.”

Ashley is well known in the industry for its innovations, in both furniture design and its manufacturing and distribution approach. What isn’t as well known is how involved Wanek was in the design process. “In 1970, you did everything. We were just a very small company, with 35 employees at that time. So you did it all. You had to come up with designs and make sure that they were manufacturable.”

But designing furniture isn’t where Wanek’s aesthetic inclinations end. He is responsible for funding and largely designing Memorial Park, a 54-acre military monument park in the city of Ashley’s headquarters, Arcadia, Wisconsin. When a particular monument needed human figures, Wanek himself sculpted the heads of the clay models for the statue.

Given this lifelong interest in design, Wanek will admit, a bit reluctantly, to being artistically inclined. “I think you *have* to be artistic if you’re going to be in the furniture business,” he says. “You have to recognize proportions and detail.”

His passion in developing Memorial Park goes far beyond simply a desire to design. Wanek has a deep, abiding admiration for the military, which he traces back to his childhood. “When I grew up, almost everybody was a veteran,” he says. “Most of my teachers were veterans of World War II and I developed a respect for the military.” His intent for the park, he says, is to educate people and remind them of the sacrifices made by the men and women who have served through the years.

Wanek is proud that his work on the park demonstrates a larger dedication to community, both in Arcadia and beyond. The park monuments recognize people from the Arcadia area who have served in war or conflict and Wanek and Ashley have made huge commitments, in both time and money, to charitable giving. “It’s something we want to do to help people and help our communities grow and prosper,” he says.

Wanek considers the rent-to-own community to be a valuable one to him and his business. “Rent-to-own has been important to us for many,



many years,” Wanek says. “We developed a model that serviced the rent-to-own industry...and developed a transportation system and infrastructure that could support it. We’ve always appreciated the [rent-to-own] business and really liked the people.”

It’s clear from the way he discusses Ashley that Wanek is proud of what he’s built and loves talking shop. It’s easy to forget that he is no longer CEO, a title which he relinquished to his son, Todd Wanek, in 2002. But even that act was done out of a love for his business. As he explains, “I looked at a lot of companies, including in the furniture industry, and sometimes fathers don’t know when to step down and let the son take over.” Wanek says he knew it was time when “I was willing to scale back growth and he wasn’t,” he says. “So I thought, ‘Well, that sounds good to me, let him go.’”

Wanek’s willingness to hand over the reins embodies his capacity for honest self-appraisal, but also it demonstrates his understanding of the need for change. “You have to change,” he says. “I’m not sure what caused the dinosaurs’ extinction, but you have to change constantly or you’ll become obsolete.” Given the continued success of his company, Ashley Furniture is not likely to become obsolete any time soon. ✧

Tiffany Hamburger is a freelance writer based in Austin, Texas.