

Palm City company sees sales increase after reinventing itself, plans Stuart move

By Paul Ivice

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PALM CITY — When family-owned American Stairs saw sales drop nearly 60 percent during the recession, the owners decided they needed to reinvent the company.

The Palm City-based manufacturer of new staircases and railings had been selling its products primarily to residential developers before new-home construction came to a near-standstill.

American Stairs branched into new markets, such as custom work for smaller homebuilders, remodeling work for individual homeowners and retail sales of stair parts to do-it-yourselfers (www.Americanstairparts.com).

Sales of those products and services have increased from 5 percent of the company's business to 35 percent, said General Manager Jamil Mikati.

Mikati said American Stairs' competition has "dropped off" since the recession began. "A lot of the bigger ones went out of business and others were weakened because they didn't adjust."

Among stair manufacturers, Mikati said he thinks American Stairs has moved up from third to first in Florida in gross sales.

Sales to residential developers "are still our bread and butter," he said.

The increase in sales of other products and services, however, is the difference between black or red ink on the company's balance sheets, said Mikati, who runs the company owned by his parents, Mahmoud and Siham Mikati.

After opening their sales to broader markets, the Mikatis began looking about a year ago to purchase a building in a higher-visibility location.

Jamil Mikati said he believes they found such a location in Stuart, southwest of the intersection of Kanner Highway and Interstate 95.

The Mikatis closed Friday morning on the \$880,000 purchase of a 14,300-square-foot building at 9011 Kansas Ave. The building had been previously leased to Florida Coast Equipment, which moved to Fort Pierce three months ago at the behest of Kubota, the Japanese tractor manufacturer, Florida Coast Equipment's primary client.

American Stairs still has "a while" left on the lease for its Palm City headquarters, so before the company moves, the Mikatis plan to spent about \$250,000 to remodel their Stuart building.

Widening its focus to a broader range of potential customers wasn't the first time American Stairs adjusted to fluid market conditions.

Almost two years after the Mikatis bought American Stairs in early 1997, they moved it to Palm City from Lantana, with encouragement from the Martin County Business Development Board.

Jamil Mikati said his parents thought most of Dade and Broward counties had been built out, so they wanted to move closer to Florida's faster-growing areas, making it easier for its sales and installation teams to reach places like Naples, Fort Myers and Cocoa Beach.



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