

Karel & Barbara Simeon Jewels of Java



Doing the right thing on their way to success

By Kristine Ellis

SOME PEOPLE find their path early in life. Karel Simeon is one of those. He started honing his entrepreneurial spirit when he was just 5 years old, helping his mother sell chickens and lamp oil at the local market on the island of Java in Indonesia.

Although the product mix has changed over the years, his determination and vision have not.

“Karel has always worked, and it has always been his dream to excel at whatever he does,” said Barbara Simeon, who helped found Jewels of Java with her husband in 1994.

The company started as an import business. After immigrating to the United States in 1989, Karel realized there was a good business opportunity as a wholesaler of jewelry, accessories and other products from Indonesia.

A few years later, he recognized another opportunity in the growing demand among U.S. consumers for teak outdoor furniture. He knew he could leverage that opening with the help of his hometown village because teak had long been a renewable natural resource on the island. Combining that resource with the carpentry talents of local farmers, who had lost their land to a government-built power plant, the Simeons launched their outdoor furniture manufacturing plant in 1998.

Green for the greater good

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Today, the factory employs more than 400 people and helps to provide a sustainable economic base for the village of 3,000.

Other growth milestones for Jewels of Java include expansion of its warehouse operations in upstate New York in 2003, and the addition of a domestic cushion manufacturing facility in 2004. Diversifying its mix, the company began producing synthetic rattan in 2005 and sling in 2008.

“Our goal for our business has always been to be community oriented — to benefit the local community at our factory as well as our local community here in the United States while bringing in quality furniture at an affordable price,” Karel said.

The couple is well-matched in leadership skills. Karel is the visionary, Barbara the detail person. While Karel’s forward thinking and eye for design creates new opportunities, Barbara manages the finances and day-to-day business of the domestic operations and oversees the Java operations.

“We balance each other in terms of the big picture and the little picture,” Barbara said.

In addition, both share a fundamental philosophy that carries them through thick and thin.

“Doing the right thing will always lead to long-term success,” Barbara said. “If you focus on the short term, you are only going to succeed in the short term, and that isn’t what we want to do. We want to be here and pass the business on to the next generations, here and in Indonesia.”

During the current downturn, that desire helped them make changes to strengthen their company for the short and the long term. For example, looking for ways to improve manufacturing effi-

ciencies led to innovative designs such as a glass coaster made from scrap wood, which eliminates almost all wood waste at the factory.

In turn, more effective design, manufacturing and packaging allows the company to pass on cost savings to its dealers.

Part of doing the right thing for Jewels of Java is its use of 100% plantation-grown teak. The Simeons think the current confusion over what constitutes being “green” is one of the biggest issues facing the industry.

“Recognizing the value of the world around us and the need to preserve it for future generations is a basic moral obligation,” Karel said. “Programs, taxes and certificates are not likely to give the desired result. We as individuals need to do the right thing.”

He points out the teak plantations in Indonesia, an integral part of the country’s ecosystem, are managed to last generations.

Jewels of Java’s teak comes from Perum Perhutani, the oldest teak plantation in Indonesia. Owned by the Indonesian government, the plantation uses a bar code system to protect the trees from pirates. In addition, cash crops such as rice and corn are planted among the trees to provide a stable food supply and livelihood for the local farmers.

“We were ‘green’ before ‘green’ was fashionable,” Karel said.

Sustainability will remain a primary piece of the Jewels of Java story for 2010, as well its commitment to managing inventory and customer service.

“For Jewels of Java, 2009 could have been better, but it also could have been worse,” Karel said. “Our whole team pulled together to focus on what is important to survive and thrive in this difficult time. Customer service remains key to our success.”


In fact, Karel and Barbara believe the biggest opportunity presented by challenging times such as these is the chance for the industry to work together and emerge as a stronger segment, offering even better quality products to future consumers. They see the International Casual

Furnishings Association as key to that process.

“I think it provides a clear path for working together that will benefit the whole industry,” Barbara said. “There will be some growing pains as the manufacturers and retailers learn to listen to each other as well as the sales reps and media, but I think it is a very positive step in the right direction for the industry.”

In the meantime, Jewels of Java will continue to do what it can to support its dealers.

“I wish I had a secret to share that would give all retailers the key to success,” Karel said. “Areas of the world and our country will recover at different rates, and segments of the economy will recover at different rates. The key to success will be to stay alert and seek counsel from people you trust.”

Most importantly, do the right thing. 

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