

# Show-and-tell approach boosts family business



Heirloom Stair and Iron's new building is pictured under construction.

## ■ Heirloom Stair & Iron's storefront showroom gives contractors and homeowners a peek at the possibilities.

By Sheila Phinazee

**The Frank Lloyd Wright**-style exterior of the family business that specializes in wooden staircases and ironwork pleasantly surprises visitors to NOMMA member shop Heirloom Stair & Iron in Campobello, SC.

"Most of our work comes from builders we've worked with, and they send their clients to our iron and staircase shops," says James Moseley, who heads Heirloom's iron shop. "We show

them different designs and come up with new ideas. By bringing them in, we can show them options they've never considered because they didn't know those options existed."

Heirloom Stair & Iron was started by Allyn and Sheree Moseley 15 years ago, solely as a staircase company with wooden circular staircases, custom made staircases, and a crew that fabricated them onsite. Although the company was originally composed of just Allyn and a few employees, over the

### *For your information*

Families like the Moseleys start a major portion of new businesses every year. Here are a few keys to family business success:

- Divide roles and responsibilities
- Establish clear, regular communication
- Treat family members fairly
- Draw clear management lines
- Treat it like a business
- Develop a succession plan



LEFT: A door crafted by Heirloom for a non-temperature controlled wine cellar.

"I tried to make it appear like you were walking up a copper pathway, through gates with iron branches and grape clusters, to the door," says Moseley.

The door is actually all one piece; it's 2" thick when viewed from the side. The wood used for the door was found on an old tobacco farm, and is approximately 200-250 years old.

"The wood has a lot of character with old nail holes and nails," says Moseley. "I glued big chunks of wood to look like one solid piece to fit the iron frame."

years, sons Ben, James, and Travis have joined the business along with more staff and the addition of an iron shop.

### Getting into iron

James Moseley had been helping his dad off-and-on while in school. At the time, Heirloom was outsourcing metal work for iron railings on wooden staircases.

"Dad approached me when I was about 19 or 20 and still in college," says Moseley. "He said, 'I'll buy you a welder if you promise to make my money back on it.'"

So, Moseley started with a stick welder on the back of a truck; that was five years ago. He now heads up Heirloom's ironworks and his older brother, Ben, oversees the wood side of the business.

"Dad started out with a few other guys, and over time they added the iron," says Moseley. "Once builders heard about the ironwork, they wanted exterior railing, driveway gates, and spiral staircases."

### Separate and shared strengths

Heirloom currently has 20 employees altogether. Although both sides pretty much function separately, they share an AutoCAD tech between the staircase and metal shops. Sometimes the two

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**All in the family: (l-r) James, Allyn (dad), and Ben (older brother). Allyn and Ben built this wooden staircase in the shop. James built the iron portion by making a jig from field measurements. The piece was finished in the shop and then set in place. "I have since learned how to do this more easily," says Moseley.**

sides come together for projects, such as building a circular staircase with an elaborate iron balustrade.

"I build the railing right on top of staircase before it goes on the truck," says Moseley.

Family members also share their strengths. Older brother Ben, who graduated from The Citadel in Charleston, makes contact with new builders while running the staircase business.

While running the iron side of the company, James Moseley also has his hands in other aspects of the business, including management, sales, and cus-

tommer service — plus, he enjoys blacksmithing. Like his father, Moseley says he's more of a craftsman than a businessman.

"Dad gets restless behind the desk and has to get out on the shop floor," he remarks. "We try to tell him we need him more behind the desk."

Moseley's younger brother Travis, although still in college, is also involved in the business. Travis laid tile and hardwood floors for the new showroom and is in the process of building a cultured stone half wall to separate the front driveway from the landscaping.

Moseley's mom, Sheree, who handles the billing and paperwork, also designed the company's new showroom, which is still under construction.

"It has an arts and crafts house feel to it," says Moseley. "Some clients say it looks like a restaurant from the outside."

### **Showroom brings products to life**

Heirloom's showroom makes use of lots of tile and hardwood flooring and has a living room area, fireplace, kitchen, and sitting areas. The showroom's upper level has a large 75-ft. balcony, along with an iron spiral staircase. Special lighting highlights art pieces. Additionally, the showroom will include one large circular staircase on the lower level, while the upstairs will house the design center and offices.

"We want to educate clients on what we can do with the custom woodwork and the metalwork they typically don't see or know about," says Moseley. The new showroom will help achieve that goal.

**"Being able to see a product is what sells it."**

The showroom also creates opportunities for increased sales, by using the power of suggestion, a tactic that's popular with fast food chains. One of the shop employees likens it to the marketing slogan, "Would you like fries with that?"

"Clients come in for a stair rail, but will see a table, other furniture, or a pot rack — and they'll also want to leave with that," says Moseley. "Being able to see a product is what sells it. Once clients see it, they'll say, 'This will really look good in our dining room.' But if I just mention other items, they often say, 'Well, we'll consider that later.'"

Heirloom's showroom and its offices, which take up about 3000 sq. ft. of the company's 12,000 sq. ft. building, were added on to the front of the original building. The 3500 sq.

This custom-designed interior railing at the top of staircase features a nature-themed railing with an organic feel. Moseley crafted newel posts with bars on top of bars to appear as if it grew from the floor. Solid round bars of 1½”–1¾” diameter were used and then tapered down to a point to create tendrils. Finally, a wax finish with a clear coat was applied.



ft. iron shop occupies the center of the building and is separated from the front portion by a metal wall. The rear portion houses the stair shop and is the biggest part of the building.

Heirloom’s ironworks division concentrates more on custom work than on being a fabricating shop, with a focus on furniture and railing. The top portion of its space is a blacksmith shop, where hand forged items are created.

“We stay on the high end of the market,” says Moseley. “We are not known in the area for being the cheapest around, but we provide quality work at a good price.”

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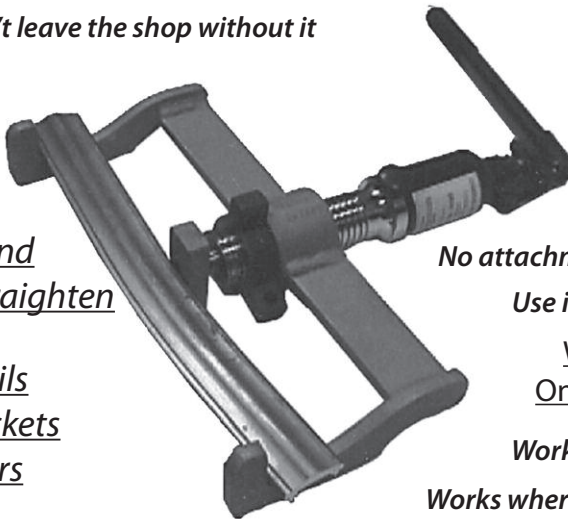
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### Location, location, location

Situated near Greenville, SC and 10 miles south of the NC border, Heirloom is also close to the well known Cliffs Communities® premier golf and planned communities. The Cliffs® — which are the sites of many multi-million dollar homes and attract affluent residents, many of whom are building their second or third homes — stretch from Asheville, NC to Greenville, SC, and feature mountain and lake views as well as golf courses created by masters such as Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods.

This proximity to The Cliffs has been beneficial to Heirloom. Most of the company’s business comes from word of mouth, and they have never put a sign in front of the shop. Moseley plans on eventually doing so, but for now they have all the business they can handle. Most of their work is residential, including grand staircases, big entry gates, and wine cellar doors.

**“If you ever** want to get better at something, always hang out with people who are better than you are.”

### Current challenges and future plans

Moseley hopes to implement powder coating as part of the business by the end of 2008, and already has favorable news from a banker. Heirloom

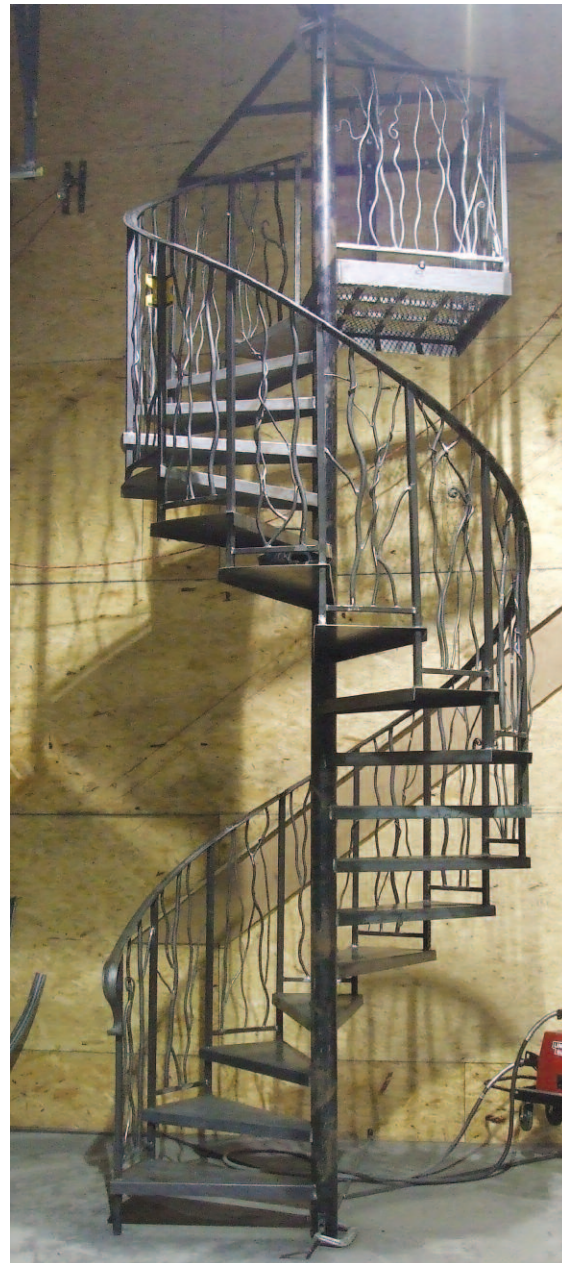


**ABOVE:** This mono string staircase was designed for a contemporary home with an outdoor fountain that begins in the front yard, runs indoors into the living room, and then out into the back yard. The client wanted the area to feel open, with nature-like elements.

“All balusters wrap around a pole and each other to look like a vine,” explains Moseley.

Fellow NOMMA member Dean Curfman of Big Blu Hammer allowed Moseley to use a power hammer on the 600 ends until around 1 a.m. “This is a good example of the way NOMMA members help each other,” says Moseley — who, incidentally, bought a hammer of his own about a month later.

**RIGHT:** This spiral staircase was built standing straight up in the shop. It appears to have lots of vines growing on it. The piece was finished by adding “spider webs” created from MIG wire; initially, the homeowner thought the spider webs were real.



will also build a new iron shop. They have been in the current shop for two years but have already outgrown it.

Moseley, who just turned 26, values the insight and feedback he’s gotten from NOMMA. “Although I’m young and the iron side of our business has only been running for five years, I have been able to forge relationships with older NOMMA members,” he says.

Moseley also takes advantage of NOMMA meetings and training opportunities, and attended his first METALfab convention in Sacramento.

“I take all the continuing education courses I can just to better myself,” he

explains. “Dad always says, ‘If you ever want to get better at something, always hang out with people who are better than you are.’”

Heirloom is also planning to create a video tour of the shop for the 2009 NOMMA convention.

Another Heirloom objective is to finish the showroom. They are doing all the painting and a lot of work themselves. Moseley notes that “it’s hard to find time to work on the business while working for the business.”

Competition and growth are included among Heirloom’s business challenges.

“There are many two-or-three-man

iron companies in the area, but we’re well known for higher end work,” says Moseley. “We have grown the most during the past two to three years. One of our biggest challenges is keeping up with the growth and always making sure we’re producing high quality work.”

At the end of the day, the company can say they have been striving to reach their main goal.

Of the company name, Moseley says, “Heirloom tells of values passed down from generation to generation. We see our work as the same, something to hold onto for many generations.” ❁