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HOWARD



Once a one-man operation, Quality Associates Inc. is now a major firm



"We're just so fortunate to be where we are today," Paul Swidersky, president of Quality Associates Inc., says of his multimillion-dollar company.

BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER 2006]

From humble beginnings

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[BY A SUN REPORTER]

The time, officially, to get from Houtzdale, Pa., to Maple Lawn is just four hours and change.

But it took Paul Swidersky six decades.

That he made it at all from the poor coal town in central Pennsylvania to luxurious Maple Lawn in Fulton, though, is remarkable.

But his improbable journey was not achieved without risks, setbacks and luck.

Perhaps more than anything, it

was sheer determination that permitted Swidersky to escape the poverty and doubtful future of his hometown to end up with a multimillion-dollar business and expansive offices in one of the most fashionable destinations in Maryland.

"We're just so fortunate to be where we are today," said Swidersky, 61, who lives in the Woodmark neighborhood of Ellicott City and is the founder and chief executive officer of Quality Associates Inc. "We have never forgotten our beginnings."

The beginnings of Quality Associates were meager: A one-person consulting firm on federal laboratory and clinical practices with one client and first year revenue that barely broke \$30,000. Today, it employs 85 people and has annual revenue of \$12 million.

But QAI's success is all the more remarkable, considering Swidersky's beginnings.

He was the last of nine children born to Frank and Blanche Swidersky. The family lived in a four-bedroom house that was built in the 1800s and served only by an

outhouse until the late 1940s.

"We were a poor family," he said. "It may seem like tough times, but it wasn't."

In Houtzdale, most of the girls left school early to seek work or help around the house, but Blanche Swidersky completed eighth grade — the highest grade the school offered — and was the only girl from her class to graduate.

Frank Swidersky finished fifth grade and went directly to the mines at the age of 11. He lost a leg when a coal saw being operat-

ed by another man struck a rock, sprang to the side and sliced through his knee.

Despite their limited schooling, Swidersky's parents were insistent that their children receive a good education.

"They never pushed us in any direction, but the thing that they did push was education," Swidersky said. "My father didn't want any of us working in the coal mine."

That advice, he acknowledges, did not always resonate fully.

[Please see QUALITY, 16G]

FROM THE COVER

From humble start ... to success

QUALITY [From Page 1G]

"I was a B student with probably A potential. I didn't work to my potential," he said. "I would come home from school and put my books down on the washtubs out in the entrance area and picked them up again on my way out to school the next morning. I wasn't always studying."

Swidersky graduated from high school in 1964 but was at loose ends. He was interested in college but didn't have a career in mind, and there was the nagging matter of tuition.

He earned money by working a job for a year in a cigar factory, churning out Tiparillos. Swidersky occasionally gave his father a box. His father enjoyed a cigar on Sunday afternoons and on special occasions.

Swidersky enrolled at Penn State's Altoona campus as an electrical engineering major, just as his youngest brother, Ronald, had.

"I don't think I knew what my interests were," he said. "I sort of followed in my brother's footsteps. But engineering was an up-and-coming field in the '60s ... You knew there was a career there."

He was selected for specialized summer courses on air-pollution control, which ultimately not only landed him a job but also resulted in a profound career change.

The University of Maryland

Medical Center in Baltimore was preparing to conduct studies on humans by exposing them to pollutants, and it needed someone who had studied pollution and also had a technical engineering background to support operations of the exposure chamber and the equipment.

Swidersky was hired upon graduation in 1967 with a two-year associate degree.

He initially repaired and built electronic equipment needed for the research project. But Swidersky increasingly became more interested in the "pulmonary physiology side of the work," or the evaluation of the respiratory system, than in his engineering tasks.

After three years, he enrolled in classes to learn the field, which permitted him to assist in the testing the university was conducting.

"I loved the research," he said. "I was learning a lot more. It was a whole new world — the biology of the person. We were learning how the lungs were affected by certain pollutants, by cold air, by certain drugs."

That same year, 1970, he married Linda M. Vanderhoof, who was an intern at the university and whom he had met two years before.

Their first son, Paul Christian, was born in 1972, and Scott was born two years later.

Money was tight in those days.

"Unfortunately, as a nongraduate-degreed person at the university, it's pretty hard to go anywhere on a career basis," Swidersky said. "If you're not a Ph.D. or physician, it's very difficult. ... The university salary just wasn't cutting it anymore."

His wife was working, and Swidersky took two jobs to make ends meet.

Swidersky realized it was time "to find another job with more potential."

By then, though, engineering was a distant memory for him.

"My interests were solely science," he said.

He was hired in 1974 by Borriston Laboratories, a unit of Dynamac Corp. in Rockville, to establish a pulmonary physiology laboratory for animal research.

"I went from humans to animals," Swidersky said.

He was later put in charge of the quality-assurance program, a rigorous process to determine whether research meets federal standards and the results are properly documented and correct.

"It's vital. It's all about the quality of your data, the accuracy of your data," he said.

He took night classes and earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Shenandoah College.

Swidersky remained with the company until 1984. But when the lab was sold, he and the new owners differed sharply on the

quality systems necessary for the research. He lasted two weeks, then was fired.

The experience was humbling, but he said it was also a test of whether he would "do what I believed in? I didn't want to change what I was doing and how I felt."

Those values were instilled in Swidersky by his parents and Dr. David Kerr, a professor at the University of Maryland.

"It's the way my dad grew up, and that was our environment," Swidersky said.

Kerr, he said, "taught me how to approach things, how to think, how to solve situations. ... He helped shape and develop me. He was a very honest person and wanted to make sure that all of the research was done properly."

Dynamac had other operations, and it hired Swidersky to review research data from other companies that were to be submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency.

He remained with the firm for about two years, then gambled in 1986 by forming Quality Associates.

Swidersky and his wife were apprehensive, but he knew the timing was right: The federal government was requiring far more research studies to meet its stiff Good Laboratory Practice standards, but there were few people in the country with experience with quality-assurance programs. "Laboratories wanted to do the

work because business was starting to boom," he said. "But if you were going to conduct studies for submission to the FDA or EPA, you had to have a GLP — a quality-assurance program — in place."

"I knew the industry. I knew the regulations. I'd been in the industry for a number of years, and I saw the need out there."

But, he said, the decision was made easier because his wife — everyone calls her Lynn — was employed and had health insurance.

"I have to say, I'm not sure I would have jumped out on my own if it hadn't been for my wife and my family," he said. "Lynn was working full time. She provided the support that I needed — both her salary coming in and hospitalization."

There may have been a need, but Quality Associates remained a one-person company for two years. And for six months it had one client before Swidersky landed a second.

"Things really began to pick up from there," he said.

Indeed. While QAI still provides regulatory consulting services to the pharmaceutical and agricultural industries, it has expanded significantly, offering training, commercial document archiving and document scanning.

By 2000, the firm had about 25 employees, and today it employs 85 — including Swidersky's wife and two sons — and has 150 clients.

The jobs for the boys were not handed on a platter. Swidersky said he would not entertain the idea until both had graduated

from college — Chris from Colorado State University, and Scott from Jacksonville University — and required them to learn all aspects of the company.

But he credits them with much of the company's recent success, saying they pushed for branching into new fields.

Chris Kelly, a neighbor, said: "Paul controls it [the company]. He tends to hold things down a bit. It's the sons who are trying to expand it."

"Paul doesn't let it get out of hand."

This week, QAI is expanding to new offices in Maple Lawn, where a new secured and climate-controlled facility to store archives is also being constructed for the company. Swidersky said he expects the company to grow considerably over the next four or five years, to more than 300 employees.

But he acknowledges the expansion must be carefully managed. "Growth can put a company out of business, too," he said.

Dale Bacon, an executive with 3M Co., the billion-dollar conglomerate, said the firm has used QAI for several years.

"We were impressed by his technical capabilities and his expertise and the way he could take something that was fairly complex and train people to understand it," he said. Swidersky "has the highest standards. He's a very ethical person," Bacon said.

Kelly describes Paul and Linda Swidersky as "great neighbors. Both give a lot to the community."

"They'll give you the shirt off their back," Kelly said. "They're that kind of people."