

Brotherly love

For over a century, the Setlakwe family has honoured the traditions first established by Aziz Sarafian, an Armenian immigrant who left his war-torn country behind to start a new life in northern Quebec

By Denise Gaze

Mixing business with friends or family is widely thought to be a recipe for disaster. For the Setlakwe family, it has been a recipe for success. To understand how this one family has been able to work together for five generations, you have to go back to the beginning, to 1904, when a young man left his war-torn country to find a better life in Canada.

Aziz Sarafian fled a turbulent and violent climate that had been brewing in Turkish Armenia since the 1880s. The Armenian genocide was orchestrated and carried out by the Turkish government against the entire Armenian population. It's estimated 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered by 1915, including Aziz's five brothers, who were assassinated by the Turks. His close friend had managed to flee Armenia, however, eventually settling in Disraeli, Quebec. Aziz decided to try and find him.

Unable to speak English or French upon arrival in Canada, Aziz set up shop in Thetford Mines, a small mining community about 20 miles from Disraeli. He changed his surname to Setlakwe – which translates to *six brothers* in Arabic – to both honour his slain siblings and keep their memory alive.

Aziz started a small business traveling by horse and buggy, selling goods to farms and residents in smaller towns in and around Thetford Mines.

"In those days, a shirt or a pair of dress pants could be exchanged for a night's lodgings and breakfast in the morning," recalls Aziz's grandson, Stephen Setlakwe, director of operations



Stephen Setlakwe, grandson of the founder, is responsible for kitchenware.

at A. Setlakwe, the company his grandfather founded. (The A stands for Aziz.)

Aziz and his wife raised eight children, four sons and four daughters. He was also responsible for sponsoring and encouraging other Armenians to come to Canada. He became known as the Patriarch of Armenian Canadians but he could never have imagined such a lasting business legacy, carried on by his family and now in its 110th year.

Aziz's son, Calil (Stephen's father), was the driving force behind the business that Aziz started, along with his brothers Sam, Michel and Joseph (Stephen's uncles).

Calil's specialty was originally furs. He was extremely knowledgeable about

different pelts and the manufacturing of fur coats in Quebec and Montreal. He would travel to New York regularly to auctions and bid on pelts. He also bought skins from many First Nations traders in Northern Quebec.

His sons Stephen, 72, and older brothers Raymond, 85, and Richard, 80, continue to carry the torch. Richard recently retired as vice president, but all continue to have input into the daily operations.

Raymond (formerly Senator Setlakwe under Jean Chretien) was A. Setlakwe's president. He recently stepped down, passing the baton to his nephew, Andrew, in 2010. Although they have a new president, "nothing important is done around here without Raymond's input," insists Stephen.

There are now three Setlakwe stores in Quebec. The original 400-square-foot wood structure corner store in Thetford Mines was transformed into a free-standing building in 1937. It has expanded to 45,000 square feet, with approximately 15,000 housewares SKUs. But the stores primarily focus on fashion for the family.

The Setlakwe family also runs eight Silhouette Lingerie Shops in Quebec and the import company Les Importations Saint Hilaire, specializing in lingerie and swimwear from Europe. Between the two businesses, the family employs 150 people, many of whom have been with the company for years.

A graduate of New York University with a Master of Science degree in retailing, Stephen first worked for Eaton's



in downtown Montreal. When his father Calil bought a store in Ste Marie de Beauce in 1965, Stephen became manager for nine months. "I was a little young for that responsibility so I went back to Thetford Mines. I have worked there for 49 years now," he says.

Stephen's primary responsibility is buying kitchenware and linens. The top selling categories at A. Setlakwe's include stemware and regular glassware. "Knives are also an important seller along with unique kitchen gadgets," adds Stephen. "We like to encourage our customers to browse and often they find the cheaper gadget initially tickles their fancy, but that leads them to the more expensive items."

A. Setlakwe's continued success is due to a number of factors but Stephen says the most important one is the simplest: "We had always agreed there would only be one chief, my brother, Raymond. When Andrew was chosen to

succeed him it was because we all agreed he was the most qualified in the family. We have never bickered over power, which has been the downfall of many businesses."

In these difficult economic times, Stephen knows how lucky they are as a retailer. Their location has turned out to be a key contributing factor. The main store in Thetford Mines is located out of the way, on the South shore of the St. Lawrence and only an hour away from the U.S. border. "There is a Walmart here, but the major chains have not moved into Thetford Mines," says Stephen.

Formerly an asbestos mining town, it started to diversify 25 years ago. A report by Desjardins Credit Union states that on a per capita basis, Thetford Mines is third in Canada as the city with the largest number of small businesses completely unrelated to mining. Diversification has been key not only to A. Setlakwe's success, but also to the town's expansion as a whole.

The Setlakwe family values have been passed down to each generation and Stephen is proud of what he calls an "old fashioned" work ethic.

"We run our business by old principles. We mean what we say and follow through," explains Stephen. "If you say you'll get back to a supplier, you should do so, whether you buy or not. Then they know your word is good, your word is your bond."

He also believes strongly in the art of

negotiation and networking. He's always looking for ways to build and improve the retailer/supplier relationship.

"Stephen is a well accomplished business man," says Jacques Dubuc, president of Trudeau. "Through many years of working closely with him, I have discovered a generous man with a great culture. His sense of humour is unique – only those closest to him can fully enjoy this quality about him!"

Stephen, along with brothers Raymond and Richard, continues to ebb and flow with the changing times while others have failed. "People always told us we were situated on the wrong side of the street," says Stephen. "But today, we're the only business left in downtown Thetford Mines. All our detractors have folded or become something else."

That doesn't mean it's always been easy. Retailing never is. As Stephen tells *Home Style*: "If you aren't prepared to put in very long hours, then retail is not the business for you."

For the family, it also helps that the Setlakwe name stands for something. "I have had to spell my name out so many times, but I am proud of it. It is well known and respected in the industry."

Although the Arabic surname of Setlakwe was adopted in response to the devastating loss of five brothers, the family continues to preserve and maintain Aziz's original vision. Five generations later, following family tradition remains the key ingredient in the Setlakwe recipe for success. 🐾



Though the 45,000-square-foot Thetford Mines store is mainly devoted to fashion, it also carries 15,000 housewares skus.