

A Small Hometown Business with a Big Heart

By Tom Fox

Tucked away in the rolling hills of northern New Jersey sits a small storefront where a group of hard-working local people are making a world of difference. Many of the items that they make end up being shipped around the world to far-off places. Today, it has become hard to find anything that has the “Made in the USA” label, but here is one business that stands out above the rest. The following is a heartwarming American story of entrepreneurial spirit, challenges, sacrifice, and change.

Where it has been hanging for many years, the one and only sign that told me that I had arrived at my location was a small plaque mounted on the front wall of the building. The plaque read “Robert F Gaiser Co. Incorporated Established 1940.” The Gaiser Company I am told is the oldest manufacturing company still operating in the Borough of Butler today. The store front was unimpressive, looking more like the front of someone's home than a thriving manufacturing company. Behind that innocuous appearance was a vibrant flurry of activity that was taking place.

Immediately upon my entry, I observed multiple rooms filled with hard-working men and women cutting, sewing, packaging, and shipping orders. After a brief pause, I was introduced to both Lisa Dore, daughter of the late Robert F. Gaiser, and her beloved dog, Tessie. Lisa introduced me to her brother, Steve Gaiser, and told me that her other brother, Kurt, who also worked in the shop, was out at the time. Lisa was kind enough take a few minutes out of her busy schedule to show me around the business before we sat down to have a friendly chat. Lisa began the Gaiser story by telling me that her father was an immigrant who came to this country in the 1930s, settling in the small town of Butler, New Jersey. Robert and his wife, Millie, went to school in Butler and are graduates of Butler High School. Working from their home at 94 High Street, Robert and Millie made handmade religious garments that Robert would then carefully bring to Barclay Street in New York City, selling them to one of the many church distributors that were in that area at the time.

As their business started to grow, Robert Gaiser bought the adjoining house next door at 96 High Street. The business was run out of both the basement and the second floor of the home while the Gaiser’s and their growing family lived on the first floor. In 1940, Robert and Millie Gaiser bought a property located at 292 Main Street Butler and they moved their business to the new location. Today, that business is still located at 292 Main Street. Over the years as the business grew, the building had two additions added on as the line of wares that they sold expanded and the company needed more space.

Today, Robert F. Gaiser Inc. makes altar tops, albs, surplices, stoles and chasubles among other religious items for the church community. Piled high in front of me ready to be shipped, were a number of boxes filled with garments. I was impressed when Lisa told me that inside those boxes were an order of 500 chasubles, custom made for the U.S. Military. Lisa Dore was proud to tell me that they have made religious articles for many television shows as well as numerous well-

known movies. A few names that you may recognize are: *The Thorn Birds*, *Law and Order*, and *From Nothing Sacred*.

When I asked if they ever had any specific hard times, Lisa went on to say that they had a difficult time back in 1962, when the Vatican II took place. This was when the Vatican took a long look at the way things had been done for hundreds of years and how they were willing to change with modern times. "Before Vatican II, the products that we made and sold were made of linen. After the changes of Vatican II, the religious items changed to polyester and we had to adapt." She also went on to discuss current hardships. "Now this past year, we had to deal with Covid. Overnight our business dropped 86%. We had to lay people off as there was little work coming in. In pre-Covid times, we had 22 employees. Now that the business is coming back, we are back up to 15 employees. It has been a difficult time for us."

When I stepped into a small side room, there was Steve Guiser proudly waiting to show me their embroidery machines. "There are 8 separately operated machines with each one holding a total of 16 needles, each needle holds a different color that you see in front of you." Lisa chimed in, "As each design is stitched, the machine, through a preset computer program, knows what color to sew and when to sew it. The machine will also automatically trim the thread as it continues to sew."

Changing the subject, Lisa's brother, Steve, talked about when his dad first started the business. "Back when we first started out, my dad used Singer sewing machines to make their wares. Today the old-style Singer machines have been replaced with state-of-the-art computerized Brother machines. Each one can run simultaneously yet they each can produce a different design." Steve went on to say, "The machines can produce 1,500 stitches per minute. They have a built-in 'Whoops' button where the machine automatically shuts off and the color can be backed up to repair the miss and be restarted to where it left off. You see this one here," pointing to one of the machines, "this one is an order for Our Lady of Perpetual Help and it is embroidering this beautiful design with 1 million stitches. Using all 16 colors, it will take two days to finish just the embroidery. "

As we returned to the front room, I spoke again with Lisa. Proudly, she told me, "We make everything cut to order. No two cloths are the same size. All of our cuts are done by hand. We do customized designs that can meet our customers' needs. Everything from start to finish is done right here in Butler New Jersey. Every item is inspected for quality control by one of the Guiser family members to ensure that all of our rigorous standards are met before it can go out the door."

The company's fast turnaround times and their ability to handle orders both big and small while providing great customer service is the answer to how the Robert F. Gaiser Company has maintained their great reputation for such a long time and is why it has a bright and shiny future.