

DREAMS AND DETERMINATION

Lavit and ThermoSoft succeed together

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Puzzles, problems and progress: all three figure into successful businesses. Successful business owners, after all, solve the puzzle of how best to serve their customers. Too, they must solve the problems inherent in nursing a new business past its growing pains, in order to progress to success.

For Mike Lavit, senior vice president of ThermoSoft International Corporation in Buffalo Grove, puzzles, problems and progress have figured as prominently in his personal life as his professional one.

"I like to work with my hands, and I like to approach problems like puzzles in life, and put them together, to solve them," he said recently in his ThermoSoft office. "That is what I did in business, too."

The affable and quiet-spoken Vernon Hills resident has made success a habit, in everything from his family's immigration to America from the former USSR, to creating ThermoSoft and helping it avoid business reversals and economic downturns, to surviving a near-fatal personal accident.

And he has done it with a remarkably simple philosophy: "I don't see failure as failure. I see it as a new chance to succeed."

When Lavit was growing up in what is now Belarus, his father would often stay up all night, working late on projects, inventions and patents. His mother attacked life with energy, "and so I got my entrepreneurship from my father, and my energy from my mother."

Lavit, now 62, learned to use that combination in his own life. He jumped successfully from a soccer career in Belarus to a career as a referee and then to a series of business accomplishments there, working to improve and speed production and manufacturing

processes for several industrial companies.

But neither he nor his wife Susan were happy in Belarus, and in 1979 they emigrated. Despite knowing no English, they and their two children, Anthony and Alexis, made their way to Chicago.

Lavit hit the ground running to support his family. He started as an auto body mechanic, offering the shop owner to work the first day for free to prove his worth. After successfully moving up to shop foreman, Lavit turned his energy to painting, and he became a successful union painter.

"I liked each of my jobs," he said. "Everything I do I like. But I didn't necessarily meet the job I loved most."

Lavit moved again, becoming a truck driver in 1981 and, eventually, owning his own trucking company. That still wasn't the perfect fit, so Lavit sold the company and jumped into the financial world, first as an insurance salesman and then as a registered securities agent and financial broker.

It was in that capacity that he met Dr. Eric Kochman and found what would become the job he loves. As he puts it now, "I went to his office to sell him a dream, and he ended up selling me on his dream."

That dream became ThermoSoft, and was built around Kochman's development of cloth fibers to conduct heat. The resulting flexible electro-conductive fiber heating mats could be used to heat floors and other items.

"When Eric showed me the idea, it wasn't developed, but it was good. Every house has a floor. Every business has a floor. Floors are cold, and when people are cold they are not happy. This dream was to change that," Lavit said.

He and Kochman, another Soviet émigré, joined with a third partner, Arthur Gurevich, and founded

ThermoSoft in 1996. Working out of their kitchens, they parleyed the original technology into a patented system known as Fiberthermics.

Before long, they partnered with companies in China to manufacture heated car seat systems, and also worked with American companies who manufactured electric blankets. Their core interest was still in radiantly heated floors, and ThermoSoft's success with building contractors grew. Lavit worked on the production end of the business, and also used his financial acumen to find backers, or as he calls them "angels."

In 2000, however, Lavit was hit with the kind of life-changing catastrophe that might have driven any thoughts of navigating a young business out of his mind. And "hit" was the operative term — he was walking to his mailbox when a minivan crashed into him; he was left for dead by the side of the road.

"The doctors told me I was not going to be able to walk," Lavit said. "But I know that all muscles can be healed. They have a memory of how they should be."

Lavit applied the same systematic thoroughness to recuperation that he did to his business. There was fear, he said, and pain, "but you do not avoid fear, you push through it. I didn't fear the pain, so I got through it."

Susan helped him with the onerous rehab, which included at least one and a half hours every day, simply forcing one hand, its nerves clenched shut as a result of his injuries, to open and close.

Still, he was away from ThermoSoft for months.

Despite substantial lingering difficulties, like a right leg that would not move correctly, and a hand that still couldn't open and close completely, he drove



Mike Lavit, senior vice president of operations for ThermoSoft International Corporation in Buffalo Grove, sits among some of the products his company is responsible for making such as heated flooring, heated blankets and pads. (Michelle LaVigne/Staff Photographer)

to work, operating the brake with his left foot and steering with just three fingers.

Kochman, now ThermoSoft's president and CEO, also uses dream imagery when he describes his and Lavit's meeting, and the formation of ThermoSoft. He liked Lavit's solid character, he says, liked the way he could depend on Lavit to finish any assignment he started.

He watched that determination as Lavit recovered from the accident.

"He's not a whiner. You know that he's in pain, but he says nothing," Kochman remembered. He wasn't surprised when Lavit returned to work as soon as he did: "We're alike in that way. If we have difficulties

we like to overcome them. He didn't pay attention to the difficulties, except to overcome them."

Today, Lavit shows no trace of his injuries, and is once again at work full time. His equable insistence on success has helped ThermoSoft deal with some reversals, such as the unexpected bankruptcy of the company which used ThermoSoft materials in its electric blankets.

Lavit and his partners then refocused on radiant flooring, he said. And the recent weak economy — including the precipitous housing development decline a casual observer might think fatal to flooring products — simply allowed them to redirect their prod-

uct placement.

"We started selling even more on the Internet — first to contractors, but because the product is so easy to put in, people can use it for themselves with just a little help. So now we reach those people who want to put it in their own homes," Lavit said.

"So again, we take a change in the economy and make it work for us."

The man who normally starts his day at 6 a.m., and has been known to work until midnight, finds time to enjoy his family, children and grandchildren. But his philosophy remains the same, he said.

"Never stop, and always think positive."

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