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# CDS MESTEL CONSTRUCTION CORP.

## Taking a construction company into the next century

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PRODUCED BY BILL ROBERTS AND WRITTEN BY NEIL COTE

Security concerns being what they are, the airport experience isn't for anyone easily exasperated or embarrassed. It entails removing shoes, sometimes showing multiple forms of identification, being subjected to more intimate probes if the walk-through machine detects something that's likely harmless but still cause for suspicion, and having inspectors behind the scenes poring through your most personal belongings.

And that's just for travelers.

It may be even more intense for the folks entrusted with rebuilding or renovating the facilities—a responsibility that CDS Mestel Construction Corp. shares with other contractors at LaGuardia and JFK International airports in New York City's borough of Queens.

With an overhaul underway at LaGuardia, and other companies reconfiguring runways and constructing a massive facility that will house all terminals, CDS Mestel is hopeful to be in charge of building ample interior retail and restaurant space that should bring amenities to an airport long said to be lacking in those areas and many others.



All sorts of eyes are watching. Eyes focused on the fiscal accountability of a LaGuardia overhaul whose total cost will likely be well north of \$4 billion by the time its 2021 completion date rolls around. Eyes hoping to envision a LaGuardia that's a significant improvement over the much-derided present airport—deemed “third world” in quality by, among other folks, former Vice President Joe Biden. And, of course, eyes focused on security.

But all that attention doesn't seem to faze young Justin Rothberg, CDS Mestel's director of business development, who represents the fourth generation of the family-owned business. The precocious 23-year-old acknowledges the work entails pressure and much on-the-job training, but says he's a fast learner, eagerly accepts responsibility, has fine mentors and is all too aware of the need for security.



When it comes to developing retail space for airports and malls, a century-old, family-run contractor on Long Island is the secure choice of many along the East Coast.

### No shortcuts on safety

Long before 9/11, security was already foremost among the concerns at LaGuardia—site of a still-unsolved terrorist bombing that killed 11 and injured 75 on Dec. 29, 1975. More recent dangers have only served as unneeded reminders for the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey to keep its guard up. The old “trust but verify” approach remains high priority, with emphasis on “verify.”

“The hardest part of construction is working in an airport,” says Rothberg, who has a finance degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo and cut his construction teeth as an intern with another large builder before joining the family business. “Outside, it’s a breeze and in the mall, it’s fairly simple. At airports, projects always take longer and cost more.”

The company’s experience should be able to mitigate the complicating factors, he says. Having done extensive airport projects, CDS Mestel says it understands how to secure clearance, bring materials onto sites and assist its subcontractors.

The company’s reputation has grown since 9/11, with recent projects coming in from the international airports in Boston and Philadelphia. Rothberg has been racking up miles along the East Coast.

CDS Mestel is confident that the company’s long history of developing Duty-Free shops as well as other stores for such airport regulars as Cartier, Chanel, Hudson News, Hermes, Coach and Mont Blanc should ensure that LaGuardia’s retail spaces will be occupied.



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## Ready for takeoff

And should anyone need further proof of CDS Mestel's capabilities, they've only to look just 12 miles away from LaGuardia to JFK International, where work is progressing rapidly on what will be a 7,000-square-foot duty-free shop that's projected to open by Labor Day.

"We have the trades working overtime and on weekends; we're really pushing this project," says Rothberg. "The carpenters, the mechanics, the steamfitters and the electricians are going nonstop. It's all nicely planned because we self-perform the carpentry."

So while his still fairly new role at CDS Mestel continues to be a learning experience, Rothberg says he's grasping it and credits the company's director of construction, Richard DiNapoli, who has been with CDS Mestel for 30 years, for constantly teaching him the ropes of an operation that's stood the test of a very long time.

Based in nearby Garden City, New York, CDS Mestel celebrated its centennial last year and Rothberg says he's confident the company will long outlive him. Since its 1916 founding in Brooklyn by his great-grandfather, Nathan Mestel, the company has always kept up with industry changes, evolving into preconstruction, design and build, construction management and general contracting.

When Mestel was ready for retirement in the 1960s, he passed the business to three sons-in-law, Sid Rothberg, Leonard Hoffman and Irving Zimmerman. Sid Rothberg left the business to his son, Ned, who's president and is grooming Justin to succeed him.





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Though prolific on the construction front and with many repeat clients—airports obviously among them—it’s a somewhat lean operation with 30 employees from whom versatility is expected, and annual revenue between \$15 million and \$20 million. The company mostly focuses on New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, but will entertain offers elsewhere.

The mall business long was CDS Mestel’s prime source of revenue. The younger Rothberg says the company is getting back into that niche with recent projects including the rebuilding of stores at the high-end, open-air Americana Manhasset on Long Island’s so-called Gold Coast. He also anticipates continued growth in airports, restaurants, banks and other commercial structures.

“What makes us unique is we can do so many things,” Rothberg says, adding that CDS Mestel can handle its own millwork installation and has its own crews performing carpentry and installing drywall. “There are guys who have been with this company for 20 or 30 years, and we can handle any project no matter how big or small.”

While Rothberg is still new to CDS Mestel, his freshness is seen as a complement to the veterans at the company. Construction methods are always evolving, and having grown up with computers, young people often have the kind of hi-tech aptitude that their elders may lack. But their elders have been working with their hands as well as their heads, and there’s no substitute for having been part of so many successful projects.

With a mix of humility and confidence that would make his great-grandfather proud, Rothberg says he’s ready to both learn and lead, and that CDS Mestel’s best days may well be in the company’s next century.

He seems very secure about that. •