

SUCCESSFULLY WEATHERING THE STORMS SINCE 1919

Historic Awning Company Keeps Miami Covered

by Allyson Markey

"Awnings are like coffee shops," explains Joan (Reilly) Garvey, Treasurer and Secretary, and fourth-generation Owner of Miami Awning Co. "Once you see one, you start to see them everywhere. But they *are* everywhere! And much more interesting than you would think."

Based in Miami, Florida, Miami Awning is an 87-year-old architectural awning and shading management solutions business, servicing areas throughout the southeastern United States as well as the Caribbean and Latin America. As it turns out, this family-owned and operated company has a tremendous story that, much like awnings themselves, is often overlooked.

This extraordinary backstory begins in 1867 with a young spitfire named Elizabeth Anne Doyle, born in Chicago. After marrying her first husband, Michael Reilly, in 1887 and having three children, her spouse died unexpectedly, leaving her and their children destitute. "My great-grandmother Elizabeth was forced to get a job, when working outside of the home was considered

taboo," says Garvey. "She talked to her mother-in-law, who agreed to help with the children, and got an office job, which was unheard of at the time."

After carefully saving her money, Reilly started buying properties throughout Chicago. "After a couple of years, she

became one of the most successful landlords in the area. She continued to buy apartments and houses and was well respected in the Chicago region. Then, she started opening and buying businesses, and became one of Chicago's most prominent business people at the time," says Garvey.



Elizabeth A. Reilly, matriarch of the Reilly family, holding Michael Reilly, current President and CEO of Miami Awning Co.

COURTESY OF THE REILLY FAMILY



Founded in 1929, Miami Awning is a multigenerational family company, with five generations involved in building the business thus far. Pictured in this photo are some of the fourth- and fifth-generation team members (from left to right): Joseph Reilly, Michael Reilly, Dan Reilly and Bill Garvey.

In 1907, Reilly remarried, and in 1919 she and her second husband moved to Miami and started an awning manufacturing business; the burgeoning operation grew swiftly, with over 25 trucks servicing Greater Miami by 1925.

Unfortunately, the couple's marriage was not as successful.

"In 1927, Grandma Elizabeth found out that her husband had a mistress," reveals Garvey. "So, she took another unconventional step and divorced him. But that was not enough. Next, she and her son, Bert Reilly (my grandfather) decided to open a competing awning business, Miami Beach Awning Co., in 1929."

She adds, "Grandma Elizabeth's entire lifestyle—from being a landlord to

owning businesses to divorcing her husband—was unheard of at the time. And within a year, her company gave her ex-husband fierce competition! She was a force to be reckoned with in the community, and she created a remarkable legacy for our family."

A FAMILY TIE THAT BINDS

In 1968, Miami Beach Awning Co. became more simply known as Miami Awning Co. Today, fourth and fifth generations work together at the business, which is now led by Garvey's brother, President and CEO Michael Reilly, who first started working at Miami Awning alongside his father, Robert Reilly Sr., in 1979. Other family members currently working at the company include Garvey's husband, Bill Garvey, who is

Miami Awning's Vice President, and her nephews, Dan and Joseph Reilly.

But family doesn't receive preferential treatment in the Miami Awning workplace. "We were taught to respect the company and our products very early in our lives," says Garvey. Her career at Miami Awning began in the office, where she was only allowed to do filing initially. "It is so easy to just pass a company to the next generation. We do not do that here—we make family members earn it. I am sure Grandma Elizabeth would have wanted it that way."

New family members who join the company must start at the bottom, either in manufacturing or installing the awnings and structures. From there, they slowly learn the business and earn

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- Joan Garvey, Secretary and Treasurer, Miami Awning Co.

COURTESY OF MIAMI AWNING



Sunbrella swag accents in this interior view of a permanent custom-designed dining terrace canopy for the CuisinArt Golf Resort & Spa on the island of Anguilla in the West Indies.

additional responsibilities, thereby comprehending and respecting every position. However, promotions are not guaranteed, says Garvey. "We are much harder on family members than others. It takes a long time to make it to a leadership position. We keep a very close eye on them!"

Respect isn't the only core value at Miami Awning. "You wouldn't think that the awning business is serious, but it is," says Garvey. "We take our jobs very, very seriously because it is so easy to make a mistake. Think about it—how many awnings have you seen that just don't fit with the building?"

FABRICATING THE FUTURE

At Miami Awning, many alternative fabrication practices are in place to ensure that the awnings, canopies, sun shades, cabanas, wind protectants, and carports sold fit with clients' needs. The owners found that the simplest way to accomplish this is to design and manufacture structures and shades in-house.

"We started to specialize in really difficult and dramatic structures, so designing or having a large part in the design performed in-house from the start just made sense," says Garvey. "Because we make everything from the steel structures to the coverings, we design with building codes in mind, which makes for a very solid and accurate structure. We can create just about anything!"

The design and manufacturing process is straightforward. Every week, more than 40 pieces of 21-foot galvanized steel are delivered to the company's sprawling commercial lot located on Northwest 31st Ave. in Miami. From there, the metal is cut to form by a team of welders to meet the exact specifications of the project. At the same time, rolls of high-quality material for the shades and awnings are delivered, sewn and heat sealed in-house by the company's fabric department. In total, the company employs about 50 welders, sewers and other staff to meet the demands of its clients.

"We also provide in-house design services," says Reilly. "Our products are different because we had an integral role in creating nearly every inch of each awning. From design to installation, we have done it all."

Designing and building the entire awning in-house creates a better, stronger product, says Garvey. This was proven in August 1992 when Hurricane Andrew, the most destructive hurricane at the time in the history of the U.S., made landfall with 165-mile-per-hour winds.

"We had just completed a large sunshade at a high-profile country club in Homestead, Florida," recalls Garvey. "It was one of our best pieces, but some of our competitors had told us that we had overbuilt the frame. After the storm passed, the only thing left intact at the clubhouse was our frame. I think that is when others started to gain more respect for our methods."

COURTESY OF MIAMI AWNING



The Miami Awning team created this 137-foot custom retractable canopy for The Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne hotel in Florida, located minutes from downtown Miami and South Beach.

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Today, you can see Miami Awning’s products at high-profile locations throughout the southeast, including The Ritz-Carlton South Beach luxury hotel, Bayside Marketplace in downtown Miami, The Breakers resort in Palm Beach, Florida, the Dolphin Mall in Sweetwater, Florida, and the Miami Seaquarium, a 38-acre oceanarium located on the island of Virginia Key in Biscayne Bay.

For six straight years the company was awarded the International Achievement Award of Excellence by the Industrial Fabrics Association International (IFAI)

for its innovative awning and canopy product solutions. In the past 25 years, Miami Awning has received over 20 IFAI awards.

Like the awning that endured Hurricane Andrew, Miami Awning has had the fortitude to weather many storms since 1929. “I know Grandma Elizabeth would be proud to know the company

she started with her hard-earned money and hard work is still working with the same philosophy 87 years later,” says Garvey. 🐼

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Miami Awning installed this retractable canopy for Bal Harbour Shops, an upscale, open-air shopping mall located in Bal Harbour, Fla.

COURTESY OF MIAMI AWNING