

Milling company is Chelsea landmark

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A few very blessed people appear to be born without the “quit” gene. For them to stop before they have reached any goal they have established for themselves is simply unthinkable. Whatever they set out to do in life, they not only complete; they do it with a lot of class.

Howdy Holmes, chief executive officer of Chelsea Milling, is a case in point.

Chelsea Milling Company has been part of the town for over a hundred years. Like many family-owned business, it has a history of both good times and bad. But unlike the vast majority that fail in the second or at most, the third generation, Chelsea Milling is thriving. Much of that success is not only due to the efforts and vision of Holmes, it is due to his whole philosophy of life.

While still in college at Eastern Michigan University, Howdy knew he would one day be part of the family business. He was the oldest of five children; his father and his grandfather before him had built the mill into a flourishing concern.

But before he took his place at the mill, Holmes had a burning desire to live out his long-held dream to be a race car driver. He had no mentor nor any connections in the racing world.



Chelsea Milling has been a part of the community for over a century.

The odds against him succeeding were overwhelming. But Holmes never paid any particular attention to the odds. He was far too busy scrambling to make a mark in the world of his dreams.

He was told he was too old at 23 to begin; most race drivers start in their teens. He was told he no experience; he simply looked for opportunities to drive any car for anyone. He began with single seat, open wheel cars. He started at the bottom and through sheer determination and hard work began the long climb to the top.

In the 1979 Indy 500, the most recognizable and prestigious race in the country, Holmes earned “Rookie of the Year” honors, qualifying in 13th place and finishing in seventh. Over the next few years, as Holmes raced all over the world, he learned fare more about business than most

people glean from the MBA program at a prestigious university.

That experience was very important to Holmes. He had always known that when he came into the family business, he would come in with more to offer than simply being a member of the family.

When he entered Chelsea Milling in 1988, Howdy took a long hard look at everything in the company. The mill was still turning a profit, but without some long-term and deep-seated changes, it would never be the success that Holmes envisioned it as.

As Holmes studied every aspect of the operation, he became convinced that some necessary and drastic surgery would have to be performed.

One of the marks of success in the changes he implemented is

the fact that Holmes, his brother and his sisters are still close and they respect each other, while keeping the freedom to dissent, without acrimony, on occasion.

The mill moved from a proprietorship, which Chelsea Milling had been under his father and grandfather, to a professionally managed team.

Holmes recruited top talent from companies around the country, such as Ocean Spray, Unisys and National Oats. He found men and women whose strengths complemented his own. The process took time.

Typically, Holmes encouraged the candidates to ask all the questions they wanted and not rush into any decision. His openness and candor resulted in putting together the team that would be the very best. Every member of that management team is still with Chelsea Milling today.

The company today produces 19 products, turning out 1.4 million boxes of “Jiffy Mix” a day. From the simple beginning that his grandmother, Mabel, made in 1930, with the original intent of making home baking simple and convenient (her comment, “It’s so easy, even a man could do it!”) Chelsea Milling leads its competitors in muffin mix, selling 57 percent of all units sold.

Amazingly, the company has never advertised. By avoiding the huge overhead that creates, Chelsea Milling has been able to keep their prices far lower than the competition.

Three hundred fifty employees comprise “Jiffyville” as Holmes calls his company. There is a remarkable sense of loyalty among the workers. Good pay, good benefits and rock-solid security, unusual in any company today, are the hallmarks of Chelsea Milling. In its long history, the company has never experienced even one layoff.

Holmes’ philosophy is simple: “You’ve got to treat people right.”

Holmes lives what he believes. While he’s quite willing, if not eager, to discard those ideas and baggage that are outmoded and no longer useful, there are some qualities he will never put away.

His strong principles, including loyalty, honesty, compassion and integrity, are deeply ingrained in the fabric of his life and they come through in every aspect of his life. He respects each person who enters his life, and he treats everyone with the same courtesy and consideration, no matter what their title or station.