

PROFILE: VIACRAFT INTERIORS, Woodbridge, Ont.



# *Sink?* **NO WAY.**

**Honesty, perseverance and hard work  
allow family to swim —  
in good times and bad.**

**VICTOR APREA** is as tough as they come, but even he can't hold back the tears when looking back on his life: "I grew up in horrible poverty in post-World War II Italy. You can't imagine. We had to beg for scraps, just like dogs. Those childhood memories will never leave me."

It's those memories that have driven the 69-year-old owner of Viacraft Interiors in Woodbridge, Ont., to make something of himself. From starting out as a teenage immigrant working 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., to now running a prosperous fine-cabinetry business, Aprea's career is a testament to how the human spirit can endure.

There have been many times over the last half century when Aprea was facing a dead end in life. He lost his first job in part because he was told he couldn't leave at 6 p.m. to attend night class at high school.

He then went on to eventually be a lead-hand at Centrac Industries, a huge manufacturer of furniture for hotels and other institutions. But, after 17 years, he just quit because he wasn't getting ahead. The images of his childhood still lingered. He was still determined to be more.

**CIL PAINTS WAS IMPRESSED** with the young finishing specialist, so they hired him as a lab technician. Yet an older, respected colleague of his said something at the time that Aprea has never forgotten. As he explains, "This wonderful and well-meaning gentleman said to me, 'Vittorio, you have no education. So be happy if you work here for the rest of your life.'"

Aprea was horrified. After reflecting on what his colleague said, Aprea quit. That starving, struggling young child in him was still yearning for more. He would not let the lack of an education, or an old friend's advice, hold him back in life. Aprea exclaims, "Are you kidding me? It made me hungrier than ever!"

This hunger led to the formation of Viacraft in 1981. Aprea, a wood finisher, partnered up with a cabinetmaker.

Aprea says he helped finance the risky venture through savings and a mortgage. He adds, "At some point, you either have to sink or swim. I decided to swim, and have kept swimming ever since."

**THE SWIMMING ANALOGY** runs in the family. Aprea's wife, Vanda, sits at the company's reception desk and handles various duties, including the company's accounting.

His daughter, Marina, has been with the company since 2008 and helps keep the business together and running. She says, "As we say, some people swim, some people don't. My father's definitely a swimmer."

Both father and daughter keep using the swimming analogy to describe their relationship with Fernando, or "Nando," as he's affectionately known, who today works with Viacraft. As daughter Marina tells it, "Nando's wife comes in all the time wishing Nando had taken up my father's offer to be a partner way back. But Nando didn't want to

swim. That's OK. He's still one of the best people in the business."

For the father, Victor, temperament is a crucial factor for success in business. He explains, "First of all, you have to want to take that risk. If you don't like risk, you can't be a business owner. Also, you can't be a quitter. You have to swim no matter what. Times will get tough, but you have to be tougher to survive."

According to the Apreas, the 2008 downturn was the latest and most severe test of the family's ability to swim. According to Marina, "It's almost indescribable how awful this last recession was. I had so many doubts about the company surviving. But my dad saw us through it. He cut back everywhere, laid people off, cut expenses — everything. But, in the end, he just didn't give up. That was the difference. He kept swimming, and we made it."

Not everyone did make it, including the company's original partner. According to the Apreas, the partner



**A relentless attention to detail is a signature trait for any product shipped to one of Viacraft's valued and trusted customers.**



didn't want to swim anymore, so he bailed out during the recession when things seemed unbearable. Says the father, "My partner leaving me was yet another difficult chapter in my life, but it paved the way for Marina to step in. Like I did in my life, she had to learn through tough times, and we have become even stronger as a result."

**THE 2008 RECESSION** serves as a jumping point for the family on a range of issues. For one thing, governmental actions at all levels left a bad taste in their mouths. Says Marina, "When they say they helped manufacturing, what they did was a bailout for the auto industry. What about us? What about our industry? We're manufacturers. We got nothing. It was sad."

Yet Marina also uses the 2008 recession as a barometer for things to come. She continues, "Let me tell you something, we got hit by the recession before everybody else did. We got hit hard. But now, business is picking up significantly for us, and it's happening before everyone else, too. The rest of the economy will follow our lead. You watch."

In an age where the terms *business* and *ethics* often seem contradictory, one value the Apreas hold above all others — and vehemently so — is honesty. For Victor, "You know what they say about liars? They have short

legs. Why? Because the truth always catches up with them."

Aprea continues, "I hold up my head high every day. I have absolutely nothing to hide. I am proud of what we do and will stand up for the quality of my product no matter what. We have had zero returns in the over 30 years we have been in business. If we can't do things with integrity and honesty, then what's the point?"

A visit to the factory floor serves as demonstration of this spirit of openness and honesty. The employees approach the Apreas more like trusted colleagues than feared bosses. The stories told by the Apreas at the front office are repeated, without prompting, by relaxed workers at the back. Jokes are exchanged, memories shared — and a feeling of camaraderie pervades the entire shop.

Aprea says, "Filippo here, he's been with us for 30 years. He's our lead foreman," as the two start wrestling together like playful brothers. Aprea moves on, "Carlo here has been here three years. Together with Filippo, there is no better team in the business. What one guy doesn't know, the other will. Believe me."

However, one thing very few people know about more than Aprea is finishing. He has been doing it for decades — ever since his days with Centrac. According to Aprea,



Far left: Viacraft is never satisfied to stand still. Although the company started out in custom-made office furniture, it will soon expand into some automation, and has already branched out into European-style products.

Viacraft's founder and owner, Victor Aprea (centre), is as comfortable with trusted employees Carlo, left, and Filippo, as he is with his own family.

Daughter, Marina, has become the point-woman for the company regarding day-to-day details, such as the quality of the components that go into every piece of furniture.



“Let me tell you, the last thing wood manufacturers should overlook is finishing. In fact, I believe it is a most crucial part of creating a high quality product.”

He continues, “When you make products like high-end office furniture, the first thing a client will notice is if the colour is off. We do custom matching for all our products. This skill is not easy. One of my current employees, William, demanded to learn finishing before going on to prep work, and he was right on. His prep work will benefit immeasurably because he now knows everything that goes into finishing.”

**THE VALUES OF HONESTY** and integrity have also benefited Viacraft when dealing with people from outside of the company. Dealers are an example. The Apreas learned quickly that, in the world of office furniture, one has to go along to get along. Marina says, “Some manufacturers try to go to the end-user directly. We thought this was the common sense thing to do at first. We quickly learned it wasn't the industry norm. So, we adapted. Some dealers require non-disclosure agreements, so we're not at liberty to tell anyone who we sell to in those cases. Sometimes a client will want to cut out the sales rep that initiated the deal, but we'll never do that to anyone.

Our word is our bond.”

The A&D community is another outside constituency that Viacraft has learned to deal with openly and honestly. Victor says, “These people have travelled the world, they know design better than I could ever hope to imagine. We have learned how to work with them. They rely on our expertise to tell them what works and what doesn't, and we rely on theirs in order to deliver a beautiful product to the client.”

A lifelong struggle in the school of hard knocks might lead some people to become stubborn in their ways. Not Aprea. He is a firm believer in adapting to the times. For example, Marina's frequent attendance to the NeoCon furnishings tradeshow in Chicago has steered the company into at least one new direction. They have become a manufacturer/distributor of the Mar line of office furniture from Italy. She says, “A more modern, European look is now the trend, so that's where we're going, too.”

Regardless of where the company decides to go, where it has been in the past should serve as more than an adequate testing ground. From the founder's triumphs over unspeakable hardship, to the family's embrace of honest values, the Apreas and Viacraft are sure to be swimming in prosperity and success for the foreseeable future. 