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From suites to sculpture: Creativity a constant throughout alumnus' career



To say Mark Yale Harris' learning curve in the hospitality industry was steep is a bit of an understatement.

Harris (BSBA '61) remembers the growing pains associated with creating and opening the first-ever Red Roof Inn location in Grove City, Ohio, in 1974. The modest facility presented two significant challenges for Harris and his friend and business partner, Jim Trueman, whom he met at Ohio State.

"The first location was like a 48-unit building with a cash drawer; we didn't understand what a cash register was," Harris recalled. "We quickly learned a few things — we needed our locations to be double the size, and we needed a computer and a cash register to function."

"That was a real learning process. But I've always found creative ways to solve business problems, or to create business opportunities."

Creativity, it seems, has been a constant thread throughout Harris' career in business and beyond.

The suite life

The success of Red Roof Inns is well-documented. Today, there are more than 650 properties around the world. Harris parlayed his initial success in the hospitality industry into another venture. After Trueman, who passed away in 1986, bought out Harris' stake in Red Roof Inns in 1978, Harris founded AmeriSuites, one of the first economically priced chain of suites in the U.S., he said. The first location opened in 1986.

“AmeriSuites was definitely a creative endeavor because it was a suite instead of a room, and it was cleverly designed,” Harris said. “There was a strong demand for that kind of a product. Today there are lots of all-suite hotels out there, but when I founded AmeriSuites there were some high-end suite hotels, but none were economically priced — and I don’t mean ‘budget.’ I mean you’re in the middle and had no competition when we started out.”

Looking back at his business career and his signature entrepreneurial ventures, Harris said skills and lessons learned at Ohio State helped him succeed — in spite of his natural inclinations.

“To be honest, I was not a great student; I wasn’t very enthusiastic about going to class,” he said. “But I was very active in fraternity life. I was president of my college fraternity and an executive on the Interfraternity Council. The whole Ohio State experience gave me a strong foundation and allowed me to learn how to perform leadership responsibilities. All of those experiences, both in the classroom and through leadership opportunities, prepared me for a business career.”

Harris oversaw the growth of AmeriSuites before selling the chain in 1996. After a series of owners, AmeriSuites eventually became part of the Hyatt Corporation.

From suites to sculpture

The sale of AmeriSuites presented Harris with another life-changing pivot point. At 61 years old, he began a second career that allowed him to completely indulge his creativity: full-time artist. The career shift represented a complete break from his work in business.

“The extent of my art was doodling in a business meeting when I was bored with the conversation,” he said. “And I didn’t do a thing with art for at least 25 years or more. Then I had the opportunity, while still owner-operator of AmeriSuites, to take some evening and weekend workshops. I sold the company and then thought ‘What am I going to do with myself next?’”

“I’ve built on this second career ever since.”

Based in Carbondale, Colorado, where he lives with his wife Claudia, who attended Ohio State, Harris has become a well-known sculpture artist. His work has been featured in more than 80 solo, museum and international exhibitions and by more than 100 publications.

Now 81, Harris is thriving as an artist.

“I really do enjoy it, particularly at my age,” he said. “I see a lot of friends who are kind of lost. They retired and their passion is golf or cocktails, or something like that. I have a purpose. I need to get up in the morning and get to work.”

While he may have traded owning and operating hotel suites for sculpting statues long ago, Harris’ business background isn’t completely buried beneath the stone dust and metal shavings in his working studio.

“I deal with art dealers, various marketing organizations and museums, so the art still engages me in the business world,” he said. “From time to time I’ll even find myself putting on a coat and tie and acting like a business guy.”



"He Rode a Dark Horse" by Mark Yale Harris

