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FE&S 2010 Hall of Fame Award Winner Jerry Greene of Hotel & Restaurant Supply

Throughout a career marked by honesty, integrity and humility, Jerry Greene has quietly built Hotel & Restaurant Supply into a powerhouse dealership in the Southeast.

Written by Amelia Levin, Associate Editor

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Southern gentleman. Those are the words that come to mind when thinking about Jerry Greene of Hotel & Restaurant Supply. And we at FE&S aren't the only ones who feel this way. His son, Mason, the dealership's director of operations, long-time business partner Ollie Wilkes, and industry colleagues say they admire Greene for his considerate attitude toward clients and others, along with his gentle kindness, humility and respect for people.

Ideally these traits would come naturally in a service-oriented business such as the foodservice-dealer one, but surprisingly that's not always the case. Working with clients, vendors, employees, industry colleagues and competitors, there's a lot of room for sleights of hand. But throughout his 44-year career, Greene has remained solid as a rock when it comes to doing the right thing, his son and colleagues say.

At the same time, Greene frequently calls his success in life blessings, a testament to his humble attitude. "I don't have all the answers, but if you work at things and are persistent, good things will happen," he says. "That's proven time and time again in my life. Even if I make mistakes along the way, I just try and learn from those. That's what life is all about."

With that simple philosophy, Hotel & Restaurant Supply has grown from a small family-owned foodservice equipment and supplies dealership to a four-location powerhouse in the Southeast. Featuring full warehouses and showrooms at each outlet, Hotel & Restaurant Supply posted revenues of \$47.8 million for the 2009 fiscal year, placing it 25th in FE&S' 2010 Distribution Giants Ranking.

Humble Beginnings

Hotel & Restaurant Supply got its start in 1953 when P.G. Greene, Jerry's father, and his business partner, Roland Rea, set up shop in the small town of Meridian, Miss. When Rea passed away in 1963, Greene bought his partner's portion of the business.



Jerry Greene, FE&S 2010 Hall of Fame Award Winner



Longtime business colleagues and friends (from left): Bill Wolfe, executive vice president; Jerry Greene, president; and Ollie Wilkes, vice president, Hotel & Restaurant Supply

In 1962 Jerry Greene transferred from the University of Mississippi from to Auburn University below says he graduated in 1965, this says he transferred in 1965, where he would earn a degree in business. He went on to serve in the Air National Guard during the Vietnam War but was not deployed overseas.

After his military service, it was time for Greene to pick a career. "My dad never pushed me to work for him, but I was always interested in what he did," Greene says. "I had a real intense desire to do design work, and lo and behold that's where I fit right in with the company. At the time, we were not doing any layout or design work, so I helped fill that gap."

Greene would spend several years as a designer and draftsman for the then seven-employee company. Eventually, he would assume responsibility for the company's business and sales aspects before becoming president of Hotel & Restaurant Supply in 1981.

"I was blessed; this job fell right in line with my interests because I enjoyed the design portion of architecture, even though math wasn't my strong suit," Greene says. "And I also got to use my business degree, which is great because I enjoyed being a salesman, too."

Greene's passion for his work and the industry mirrors that of his father. "He worked two days up until he passed away in 1989," Greene says. "He was in a nursing home at the time, and we would pick him up, take him to the office for a few hours and take him back at the end of the day."

Likewise, the younger Greene's dedication and diligence are among his defining traits in both the business and the community. One of his activities that combined the two is serving on the board of Meridian Community College, where he gives a scholarship to the Restaurant and Technology program, a two-year program that teaches students about equipment and business management (see below).

Growth Curve

Despite his passion for the business, Greene says he never actively sought to expand beyond his hometown. But in the early '80s, he saw an opportunity in Jackson, Miss., about 90 miles from Meridian. "Meridian had a population of 45,000, while Jackson had 300,000," Greene explains. "Around that time, some of our competitors went out of business, so when we opened there, we were able to hire several employees from both companies." At the same time, one of Greene's employees and longtime friends, Bill Wolfe, was looking to move and instantly showed interest in running the Jackson office. Wolfe, now an executive vice president for Hotel & Restaurant Supply, continues to be an integral part of the dealership's success. Shortly after graduating from the Mississippi State University a few years later, Mason Greene, Jerry's son, joined Wolfe in the company's Jackson location. The 34-year-old Mason now serves as director of operations and unofficial technology guru.

In the mid-'90s, opportunity knocked again, and Greene answered. "A gentleman who was working for one of the food companies in Memphis came to us and said he was looking

to make a change and asked if we'd ever thought about opening an office there," Greene says. After thinking it through, Greene and his business partners took the chance. Paul Levine, the salesman and entrepreneur with the idea, headed up that office. Ten years later, Levine serves as sales manager for the branch, and Jim Moran is general manager.

"Then in 2005 the same thing happened," Greene says, as if he's surprised by the thought of it. "Tennessee Restaurant Supply was purchased by another dealer that would close soon after the transaction was complete. Phil Pendley was one of several employees who lost their jobs. He called us to see to see if our company was interested in going to Nashville."

Like Levine, Pendley was a complete stranger. But Greene and company gave it a shot again, though the decision came the same day the office was closing so its employees could evacuate or brace for Hurricane Katrina, and it worked.

"We were very fortunate to have these quality people call us," Greene says. "We had to make that hard decision to go to Memphis and Nashville, but felt we knew what we were doing, and even if it would take a while to get started up, we had enough tenacity at the time to do it. I think that the most important thing I can say about this, though, is that I wouldn't have expanded if I didn't think we could trust those involved in each of the proposed locations."

The expanded Hotel & Restaurant Supply caters to foodservice segments beyond restaurants, including schools, hospitals and other bid work. As part of its evolution, Hotel & Restaurant Supply has had a lot of success working with franchisees of chain restaurants that began in Mississippi. Ironically, the company doesn't do hotel foodservice, despite its name. Greene's father used Hotel & Restaurant Supply because at that time restaurants in the South and in Meridian, in particular, were located mainly in hotels.

Like any business, Hotel & Restaurant Supply hasn't gone without its challenges over the years. When Katrina blew through Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the floods bypassed the dealership's warehouses, but power and communication was a challenge.



Maribeth WolfeAngelo, Mike Williamson, Mason Greene, Hotel & Restaurant Supply Operations



Jim Moran (left), general manager of Hotel & Restaurant Supply's Memphis branch, and Paul Levine, the branch's sales manager, review the drawings for a client project.

and showroom here now."

Wilkes attributes the company's ability to get through this setback mainly to Greene's ability to work through things and his patience. "Jerry was brokenhearted after the fire, but he picked himself and us back up and got back in the race," he says.

Building Lasting Relationships

Working with family members or friends can strain even the strongest of relationships. In Greene's case, however, the opposite appears to be true. Wilkes describes Greene as having a huge heart and being gracious with customers, which is among the reasons why he has enjoyed working with Greene over the years. Mason Greene agrees: "We've definitely grown closer over the years by our work together. I've learned the most just by watching him and seeing how he makes decisions, and how he interacts with employees, vendors and customers."

When it comes to interacting with employees or customers, Greene is known for his upfront, honest demeanor. "He's not one to hide anything," Mason Greene says. "He's very upfront and explains everything thoroughly. He always tries to do the right thing for the customers in the long run, even if it may cost him in the short run."

Mason Greene says he doubts he would have considered working in the foodservice equipment industry had it not been for his father and family involvement, but he says he's thankful for where he is and where the company is, "not just in revenue growth, but in how we do business."

Greene doesn't micromanage, and that's allowed his son to flourish in the Jackson office, where Mason has earned a reputation for being the technology go-to guy, from building an online presence to updating filing and management systems.

Technology is one part of both short- and long-term goals at the company. "That's another blessing – Mason being very interested and savvy at that," Greene says. "We're doing our best, but in the end I think all of us in the industry will have to be more in line with the new technologies. If we're going to continue to service our customers, we need to take that to the next level."

Greene isn't referring to online selling, but rather making his website more approachable and information-packed as a "value-added service" to his customers.

When it comes to other long-term goals, Greene says he's looking toward their budding franchise restaurant customers as a potential for growing the business. "Right now our



Murphy Culpepper (left), sales manager of Hotel & Restaurant Supply's Meridian, branch, and Wayne Horne, general manager of the branch.

franchisee business is about 20 percent of our business, and it's likely only going to get stronger down the road, so our emphasis is on that," he says. "We're also still going strong with hospital and school segments, at about 40 to 50 percent. B&I is a broad, growing segment. That makes up about 10 percent to 15 percent of our business right now."

He feels such revenue diversity will be the key to Hotel & Restaurant Supply's ongoing success. "I hope that the future of the company is always having that broad approach to selling, rather than putting all your eggs in one basket," Greene says. He sees the company as stronger on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but he'd be open to taking a hard look at other parts of the country if opportunities arose. "Internally, we need to keep improving efficiency-wise, with our warehousing, deliveries and operations – Mason is good at that." This quote doesn't really fit here, unless it's made obvious that he thinks the company needs to make those internal fixes before he would consider growth outside the region.

Externally, Greene is active in industry organizations and continues to build upon his many strong, existing relationships. This transition is kind of forced. Maybe a subhead would help. He also focuses on maintaining strong relationships with manufacturers' reps, knowing them and what they do, he says.

Greene has served on the board of the Foodservice Equipment Dealer's Association and a few years ago served as the president and chairman of the IFED buying group.

When asked what he most proud of, Greene turns quiet for a moment and turns the conversation back to others. "I think and hope how I feel about others and how I've treated others – or is my perception anyway– is what has been a part of our success," he responds. "Compassion for your fellow employees and a desire to push them and encourage them – that's been my goal over the years. I've tried not to make it just about me and more about encouraging others to do what they do best and do the right thing. If others feel that way about me, that would be wonderful." This is a really great close, and naturally ties back to the lead without having to state it. The rest seems anticlimactic. If you want to keep the family stuff, it can be worked in pretty easily where Mason is introduced.

1953	P.B. Greene founds Hotel & Restaurant Supply in Meridian, Miss., with Reynold Rea
1964	Ollie Wilkes, Jerry Greene's longtime friend and business associate, joins the company under P.B. Greene (Wilkes leaves the company a few years later and returns in the '80s)
1965	Jerry Greene graduates from Auburn University with a degree in business
1966	Greene starts to work for Hotel & Restaurant Supply
1973	Bill Wolfe joins the company
1981	Greene is promoted to president of Hotel & Restaurant Supply; new office opens in Jackson, Miss.
1989	P.B. Greene passes away
Late 1990's	Hotel & Restaurant Supply opens Memphis, Tenn., office
2005	Hurricane Katrina hits the Gulf Coast in August and forces the business to temporarily halt operations; Nashville location opens
2006	A fire completely guts the company's headquarters, forcing the dealership to relocate
2010	FE&S presents Jerry Greene with FE&S' 2010 Hall of Fame Award

Connecting with the Community

The Meridian Community College Foundation is a 30-year-old, nonprofit organization dedicated to involving alumni, friends and business leaders in the growth and advancement of the college. The foundation's mission is to provide leadership in attracting private investment to the college, to demonstrate exemplary stewardship whereby the college can strengthen its commitment to excellence, and to foster a better understanding of individual and corporate philanthropy. Can this description be tightened up? It reads a little like a brochure.

Jerry Greene has been a member of the Foundation's Board for the past nine years, a position he's served alongside longtime friend Kathy Brookshire, the foundation's executive director.

"Through his business, he brings a wealth of knowledge," Brookshire says of Greene.

She adds that he played a leadership role in expanding the foundation's Hotel and Restaurant Management Technology program, a series of courses and activities designed to train up-and-coming leaders in the foodservice and foodservice equipment industries. Is that a foundation program or a college program? "Jerry has been instrumental in helping that program with his support," Brookshire says. "He has always been there for the students, the instructors and the foundation board if there's a problem or if help is needed. We attribute Jerry to that program's tremendous success." Hmm. Wouldn't you attribute the success to Jerry?

The MCC Foundation offers a variety of other programs for students, alumni and elder community members. For example, it has invested more than \$1.6 million in a tuition program, which helps about 350 students annually.

Greene says he joined the board after being approached by are businesspeople. "I thought it was a wonderful idea," he says. "Each year we have a fund-raiser to raise support for these programs and I call on local businesses I've known. Every year they give back. It's one of those things you become real proud of – especially when your community gets behind you on it."





(From left): Maribeth Wolfe Angelo, sales manager of the dealership's Jackson branch; Mike Williamson, general manager of the Jackson branch; and Mason Greene, Hotel & Restaurant Supply Operations, review some client information.

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