



INTEGRAL ROLE: Heather Handrigan-Ross, third-generation owner of Atlas Pallet Corp. in Burrillville, says the manufacturer understood with the onset of COVID-19 “that if people wanted to get masks, wanted to get consumer goods, pallet supply lines would have to flow.”
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

I am most appreciative of the guidance we received from **RIMA and The Rhode Island Truckers Association** during the early days of the Pandemic. The uncertainty and complexities of navigating Covid-19 were made easier knowing that **RIMA had such an active role facilitating communication and advocating on our behalf.**

Pallet maker stacks up

Manufacturer eyes expansion **BY NANCY LAVIN | Lavin@PBN.com**

IN A HOT-PINK MASK and blown-out hair, Heather Handrigan-Ross may not fit the stereotypical look of a manufacturer.

But as she strode into the production area of **Atlas Pallet Corp.**, donning safety glasses and raising her voice to be heard over roaring chainsaws and thunderous hammer smashes, she was the picture of confidence. She pointed to one worker sorting through the stack of already-broken wooden boards the Burrillville company collects to repair and resell.

“That’s an extremely difficult job,” she said of the worker, who slams the boards against the ground to expose the already-broken parts without breaking the boards any further, before stacking them by type of grade. “To have that level of skill, adhering to quality over and over again ... is not easy.”

Her appreciation and respect for the skill and effort the industry demands comes from deep-rooted family ties. As the third-generation business owner, she grew up surrounded by the earthy wooden smell of the recycled pallets and clamor of construction. When she surveys the towering stacks of wooden boards across the site, she sees grades, specialty sizes, the combination of new components and recycled materials that go into each pallet the company

sells.

“Pallets are in my lifeblood,” she said.

Yet neither Handrigan-Ross nor her two sisters were expected to take over the family business. Her father, Earl Handrigan, didn’t want his three daughters involved in such a rough-and-tumble industry that even now is predominantly male.

She studied economics at Rollins College in Florida before returning to her home state to work in insurance, specifically workers’ compensation claims. Her emphasis on safety, especially in a high-hazard industry, comes directly from this work.

She loved her insurance job but took more than a decade off to raise her four children, filling spare time with active roles in parent-teacher associations and other community groups. These experiences, too, shaped her ability to take on company ownership, teaching her about grit and strength and juggling a busy schedule.

When she was ready to return to the workforce, her dad recognized the assets she could bring to the family business and brought her on.

The pair still talk every day, and Handrigan-Ross repeatedly credited her father for transforming what was a two-person shop in Central Falls when he took the helm to one of the largest and oldest manufacturers of recycled pallets in New England, with a 40-person staff and a sprawling 16-acre property.

She credited the company success to her father’s business savvy, but she too has stepped up amid the unforeseen challenges brought on by COVID-19. Managing her employees’ anxiety and new child care needs amid distance learning – the son of one of her office workers attended school at the site – was stressful, as were the changes to operations and sanitation procedures, particularly given the surge in demand for pallets.

“We weren’t the face of the pandemic, the health care workers, or anything, but we knew that if people wanted to get masks, wanted to get consumer goods, pallet supply lines would have to flow,” she said.

Yet the company ended the 2020 year with as strong a performance as the year prior, she said. Hoping to capitalize upon the success of her company and “elevated place” pallets have taken on since the pandemic began, her business sights are set on growth – in revenue, as well as clients, employees and property. ■

OWNER: Heather Handrigan-Ross
LOCATION: 50 Old Mill St., Burrillville

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Recycled pallet manufacturer
EMPLOYEES: 40-50

YEAR FOUNDED: 1969
ANNUAL SALES: WND