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# Paying It Forward

Robert Marash of Innovations Lighting opens up about how these 3 Rs – recovery, redemption, and reinvention – have been pivotal to his success with Innovations Lighting.

BY LINDA LONGO

The decade before the housing bubble burst, causing a massive Recession, was a great time for the lighting industry as the new construction market boomed. Robert Marash, who owned Landmark Lighting — a manufacturer renowned for Tiffany looks among other popular styles — was well-known in the industry, having served on committees for the American Lighting Association (ALA) as well as the Dallas Market Center's Lighting Board of Governors, plus maintained a permanent showroom in the Dallas Market Center for many years.

"The 2008 Recession put my back up against the wall [financially] and I was struggling," Marash recounts. Based in New York, Landmark Lighting's West Coast office was under the direction of two respected industry veterans, who suddenly had major medical crises to handle. "I knew I couldn't handle things there on my own and began to drink my problems away," he comments. Marash put together a plan to bring Landmark's operations back to the East Coast and approached Mark Fludgate and Brad Smith, the top executives at ELK headquartered in Pennsylvania, to see if there was a possibility of renting storage space in their warehouse for Landmark's inventory while he figured out his next move. When the suggestion to merge was proposed, he readily agreed.

While his financial situation improved with ELK's acquisition of Landmark, Marash was surprised to find himself at loose ends without the daily hands-on interaction of managing a company. Over the next four years, that boredom led to drinking alcohol more frequently and earlier in the day as time went on.

"Alcoholism affects you three ways," Marash says, evoking Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) teachings: Spiritually, Physically, and Mentally. While the rest of the lighting industry was unaware of what was happening, Marash's family members and business associates couldn't help but notice and become alarmed. Then there were two legal charges of driving while intoxicated. "Hitting my bottom was when my accountant called to go over the previous year's taxes that I hadn't even filed," he confides. Raised Catholic, Marash looked up into the air and said to God, "Tell me what to do."

The answer, he says, came swiftly: Go to rehab. "Something told me this might be the only way out," he affirms.

## A PERVERSIVE PROBLEM

- 1 out of every 3 Americans are affected by alcoholism in one way or another.
- Alcoholism affects people from all walks of life.
- Alcohol abuse is one of the nation's most preventable causes of death, second only to tobacco and a poor diet/sedentary lifestyle.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), more than 88,000 people in the U.S. die from alcohol-related deaths each year.

It was during that voluntary 30-day stay at Graymoor, a Franciscan Friars-based addiction treatment and recovery community in nearby Westchester, that Marash was introduced to the tenets of AA. There were no second thoughts. "I did everything they said to do," he recounts. After his stay, Marash attended 80 AA meetings within 90 days, often going mornings and nights. "I'm an over-achiever," he jokes. "I was one of the lucky ones who stuck it out and didn't relapse."

Just because he was able to adhere to the program, through dogged determination, does not mean there weren't challenges. "It was three years before my wife and children would speak freely to me again," he admits. Close relationships such as those with his wife, his parents, and business partners were strained to say the least...but all slowly proved to be repairable.

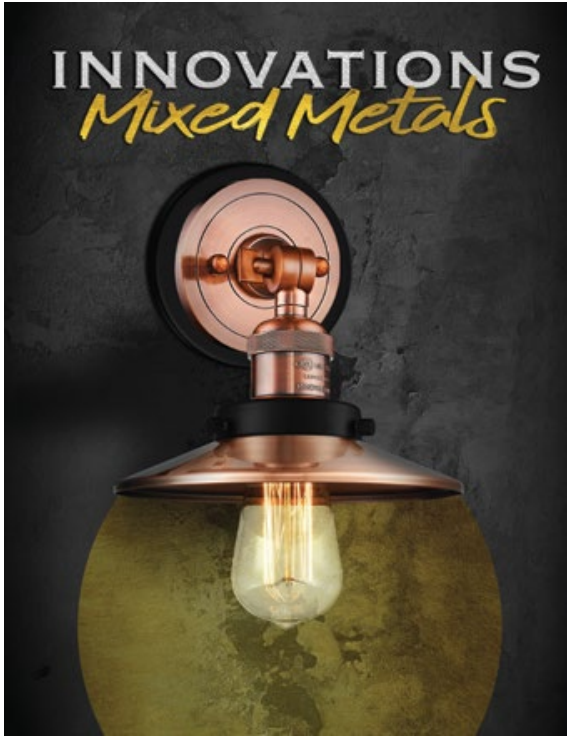
Robert Marash of Innovations Lighting (top) is appreciative of the hard work from friends Ramiro Carpio and Greg Mazza.





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“Another one of our recent ‘claims to fame’ is offering a complete choice of mixed metals and allowing the consumer to mix and match any one of our 9 colors together for their own custom look at no upcharge,” Marash says.

### SECOND CHANCE

After mastering the initial steps of accepting responsibility for past actions, recognizing one’s inability to control alcohol intake, surrendering to a higher power, and working on oneself, Marash was ready to get his work life back on track. Entering another field never crossed his mind.

“Lighting has been my life since I was a junior in high school, when I worked as a draftsman for Leonard Geringer (aka LG, ELGEE, ELGEE WEST) in 1974,” he states. [Geringer eventually retired and sold ELGEE to David Littman of Littman Group/Hudson Valley Lighting and Marash founded Landmark Lighting.]

He decided to go back to basics, visiting factories in China where he had relationships in the past. Observing that the current market was full of me-too merchandise at ridiculously low prices, Marash opted to do the opposite. He selected a simple, one-light, wall-mounted fixture as his first product and made quality the priority.

“Everyone was concerned with making things cheaper, but I wanted to make this fixture better than anyone else. I wanted to upgrade the quality with features like heavy-cast backplates, porcelain sockets, solid brass swivels and necks, hand-blown glass, and a variety of finishes. And instead of the typical one-year warranty, I give a lifetime warranty on the wiring and two years on the finish,” he explains. “The customer can pick their own glass, finish, and model. It’s like they’re making their own custom piece. It’s known as the ‘HOW IT WORKS’ method, which also ties into AA’s method of recovery.”

Marash named his new venture Innovations Lighting and adopted these words as his business creed: “Create a quality product at a fair price, make a commitment to service, and the customer will repeatedly purchase with confidence.” The company tag line is, “Creativity meets evolutionary design.”

Raising the capital necessary to see this idea to fruition – even on the bare bones level – was

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tough after what he had recently been through, but his good friend Ramiro Carpio believed in his vision and lent Marash the money to get started. “He had faith in me. He lent me his entire life savings to make this work,” he remarks.

The first warehouse in 2013 was literally a tent in Carpio’s backyard. “Hey, Amazon started in a garage; we started in a tent,” he jokes.

“I went all-in on this upgraded product idea. I think what really sold the line [to showrooms] was giving the end-customer choices; the only investment for the showroom was the point-of-purchase display. They didn’t have to carry inventory, so there was no risk. Orders are shipped on the same day they are received, plus we give a 2.2 IMAP to protect the distributors.”

Innovations Lighting started out small, locally at first until those dealers were selling through regularly. Then it was time to expand. “We went from one tent to two, then three, and eventually a 900-sq.-ft. warehouse in Peekskill, New York.

“Five years later we’re in a 45,000-sq.-ft. office and warehouse and have grown from two employees to 26. I’m running this business with absolutely no debt.”

In order to grow the business, Marash knew he had to bring the line to Dallas Market. He leased a booth in the Temporaries section in order to gather retailers’ feedback. “I told them I was here to experiment [to see if the line had national appeal]. People came and loved it,” he says.

It wasn’t just retailers who noticed Marash’s booth. One of those people who stopped by was Malcolm Tripp, President of American Lighting Brands, the domestic manufacturer headquartered in Chicago with brands such as Framburg, Arroyo Craftsman, House of Troy, Scatchard Stoneware, and Thumprints. “Malcolm asked me, ‘What are you doing here in the Temporaries? You belong on the lighting floors.’ He put his hand out to me and welcomed me to exhibit in a portion of his showroom in the Trade Mart.”

When Innovations first began, boxes were housed in an outdoor tent in a neighborhood backyard. Now there are two brick-and-mortar warehouses in New York — one in Buchanan and the other in Peekskill.



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#### GIVING BACK

When Innovations Lighting began expanding, the first place he thought to look for good warehouse help was Graymoor. Having been through the program, shoulder to shoulder with good people who faced difficulty getting hired out of rehab, Marash wanted to extend a helping hand.

Offering minimum wage and a safe environment for a recovering addict – “We start each day together, saying the AA Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can and the wisdom to know the difference” – Marash offers part-time work for those who have already completed one year of sober living. “A lot of those part-time workers have turned into full-time employees. It makes you feel good to be able to help someone,” he notes.

One of those people is Greg Mazza, a former mortgage banker and business owner, whom Marash met at Graymoor. “I happened to be at a golf course one day and noticed Greg on a lawnmower, cutting the grass. I recognized him from the program and had heard him speak [his story] and liked how he presented himself at Graymoor. I invited him to work for me in the warehouse,” Marash recounts. Excelling at the menial tasks, Mazza was soon given opportunities in customer service and later sales management before serving in his current position as VP/Sales & Marketing, where he was also responsible for the visual merchandising of the company’s new

Marash calls his company’s display tower “our Innovations vending machine” due to its ease of use. Dealers simply invest in the display with no need to order inventory. “We ship orders same day before 2PM, have a 10-percent freight cap, a 2.2 IMAP, and no strings attached,” Marash says.

Among those early accounts who took a chance with the line were retail powerhouses such as Lamps Plus, Capitol Lighting, HI-LIGHT, Horton’s, and Connecticut Lighting, to name a few. Now, beginning with the summer market, Innovations Lighting has its own permanent space adjacent to the American Lighting Brands showroom. “People think we’re too good to be true, but we ship all stocking orders on the same day and we’re honest with our customers about shipping dates. It’s all family values,” Marash states.



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Angie Prost of Lighting One bestows an award for “Best Sales Performance” to Robert Marash at the organization’s June 2019 convention.

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showroom in the Dallas Market Center. Another recovering employee, Frank Schneider, stepped up to take over a warehouse role and holds a foreman position to this day.

There are times when some of the Graymoor graduates haven’t worked out, or perhaps left to take better jobs — and that’s quite alright with

Marash. “They’ve all thanked me for giving them that fresh start. When you let go of what you think you have to do and just let a higher power take control, [good things] come back to you. You do an accountability of yourself at the end of the day. I sleep good at night,” he quips.

Marash believes much of Innovations success is a testament to the turnaround he’s made on a personal level as well as the transformation of the people he’s hired.

“The success of Innovations is not the product, but the attitude of the people we have. It’s about honesty and being genuine, humble, transparent, and living a clean life. You have to believe in a higher power to guide you. This [way of life] makes you a better person. For so long I felt like it was me against the world. I thank and pray to God every day and don’t take my family, friends, and employees for granted. I try to make our employees feel like they are a part of something. I’m grateful for the clarity to surround myself with good people and the ability to help the next [person] up.”

As Marash sees it, he’s just returning the favor to the lighting industry. “No one owed me anything and yet people gave me a second chance. They gave me the opportunity to start my life over. This is a forgiving industry; you can fall and get up again. I’ve had so many friends in lighting, it’s been overwhelming to be welcomed back.”

The company culture is very much like a close family. “It’s not a ‘me’ program, it’s a ‘we’ program,” he says of the corporate structure. “Employees are encouraged to communicate their issues on a daily basis and realize that together we can accomplish anything we set our path on,” Marash comments.

“It’s not about looking at what you’re giving up in life, but what you’re gaining,” he shares. “If anyone in the industry wants to learn more about what we’re doing or the struggles we’ve faced, they are welcome to contact me. I would open my arms to anyone struggling and tell them you can do anything you want in this world without a drink or a drug. This industry is very forgiving. Don’t hide in a bottle; there is a solution! You too, can live life beyond your wildest dreams!” ❖