



# Family values

## EDiS celebrates a 100-year American success story

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EDiS CEO E. Andrew DiSabatino, Jr. (Andy) points to the picture of company founder Ernesto DiSabatino when asked about the reason for the company celebrating its 100th anniversary.

It's a standard answer when family owned companies mark important milestones. But Andy takes it a step further.

"He's my mentor, even though I never heard his voice," he says.

He goes on to mention the values of honesty, craftsmanship hard work and community that continue to this day.

In the past century, EDiS has grown into a business that books \$200 million a year in work, making it the largest locally based building contractor, according to the Delaware Business Ledger Book of Lists. (See ranking in this section). It is not alone in reaching the milestone M. Davis and Sons, a five-generation industrial contractor dates from the 1870s. Concrete contractor Healy, Long and Jevlin can trace its roots to a now defunct family owned building contractor that was a long-time rival to EDiS and operated for a century.



Andy DiSabatino points to a set of unique circumstances that led to the company's success.

"He didn't need to come to America," he notes. A master stone mason, Ernesto and his eldest sons stayed busy with tunnel projects that took them far from their home in a village in the Abruzzo region of Italy. His sons wanted to join the wave of immigration. Ernesto was not so sure.

He finally decided his sons would make the journey, only if he came along.

It was a courageous decision that held the family together and set the stage for future success, Andy says.

Legend has it that the DiSabatinos were on their way from New York to Baltimore when they accidentally got off the train at Wilmington. The tale can't be confirmed, Andy says.

At any rate, they had a sponsor in Little Italy resident Luigi Pedicone and settled in the city's Little Italy neighborhood. Generations of Pedicones went on to work for EDiS, a company where 20-30 and 40-year employees are commonplace.



Photos courtesy of EDiS

**Founder Ernesto DiSabatino, left and with his family, bottom left, earned a Papal Cross for his work in building St. Anthony's Church, a landmark in Wilmington's Little Italy neighborhood. In the 1930s the company moved into high-rise construction with the DiSabatino Building, below.**

Thanks to their skills at the ancient craft, the DiSabatinos quickly found work.

Ernesto moved quickly and within 15 months of his arrival established what is now EDiS. His sons were quickly able to submit written estimates with impeccable penmanship and flawless grammar.

One estimate remains a prized document at EDiS.

The firm quickly secured larger projects and built homes in the neighborhood.

Perhaps best known was St. Anthony of Padua Church, a landmark in Little Italy. Ernesto DiSabatino later received the Papal Cross in honor of his work in starting the parish and spearheading construction of the church building.

According a history of St. Anthony's, 400 members of the Little Italy community attended the Papal Cross event. The guest list includes names such as Fortunato, Corleto, Cantera (later joint venture partners with the DiSabatinos), Tigani, Rizzo, Piccotti, Ianni and Pileggi.

"It was a community effort," Brian DiSabatino says of the construction of

St. Anthony's, who takes pains not to portray the work as a family project.

One clue to those who were most instrumental in the formation of parish can be seen in carvings, Brian says. The cherubs bear the likenesses of Ernesto DiSabatino, Alex Petrillo and the parish's legendary priests the Rev. Francis Tucker and the Rev. Paul Fournier. The Petrillo family is well-

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# War presented opportunities and challenges

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known locally for operating ready-mix concrete companies.

Ernesto passed away in 1932 and left the business to the four sons, Arthur, Clarence, Dominick and Paul. Arthur went on to work outside the company, founding DiSabatino & Ranieri, a company that operated for many years. Its successor is DiSabatino Construction Co., started by Larry DiSabatino in the early 1980s.

Along the way, DuPont Co. became a customer for EDiS with the company doing work on the Nemours Building and the Edgemoor plant, where bricks were used to line furnaces. Richard P. DiSabatino, who like Andy, is a fourth generation executive, remembers working in high temperatures at the plant.

“When conditions were tight, DuPont would take up the slack,” Andy says.

EDiS also built homes near its headquarters on Lincoln Street, as well as finer homes and estates in the area.

In 1937, it constructed and owned the seven-story DiSabatino Building that still occupies a site on Ninth Street in downtown Wilmington.

As the business moved into its third generation, it was clear that advanced degrees were necessary, if the company was to move beyond the masonry and home-building business. The sons of Clarence, Dominick and Paul headed

for college.

Perhaps the most challenging period for the company came during World War II, a period when the third generation served their country. Eugene DiSabatino, an engineer, worked on the Manhattan Project that produced the atomic bomb. While work was plentiful (projects included wartime housing and conversion of civilian factories to military products) the temporary loss of top management was no small matter, Andy says.

Following the war, the third generation of owners and managers went to work building schools for the horde of “baby boomers.” Education remains a key market for EDiS.

It also worked to convert a former tank plant to Chrysler’s Newark Assembly site. Removal of the wooden floors used to move the track vehicle along assembly lines

took many years.

One turning point for EDiS came in the early 1970s when the company pioneered the use of construction management at the Delaware Technical and Community College Stanton Campus.

Construction management is a key area for the company, although it also has other companies that do interior construction, construct Butler pre-engineered structural steel buildings and help manage properties

In working with a joint venture



Photos courtesy of EDiS

**At top, the current management team of EDiS. Also shown on this page are signature buildings constructed by the company. At left is the PNC office tower in Wilmington. At bottom left is the Hercules Incorporated headquarters, at bottom right is the striking front view of the Delaware Museum of Natural History.**

partner, company executives worked with Theodore “Ted” Dwyer. An architect by training, now serves as EDiS president, heading construction operations.

Andy says that while Dwyer came from a far different background, it was apparent he shared the company’s values. Dwyer is also active in community affairs.

The company was a key player in the building boom that came after the passage of the Financial Center Development Act.

The act brought tens of thousands of banking jobs to the state.

The boom ended abruptly in the early 1990s and EDiS felt the pain. However, Andy says the company remained profitable throughout most of the downturn. It was also aided by conservative fiscal policies that plowed profits back into the business.

In an earlier case, the decision to not to take on a project may have

allowed the company to celebrate its first century.

In the 1970s, the company was eyed as a bidder for the I.M. Pei building, a downtown Wilmington landmark designed by the world-renowned architect.

While EDiS had the expertise, the company was uncomfortable with the configuration and engineering features of the high rise.

It proved to be a wise decision. Problems with the project, coupled with labor unrest at the time, sent the builder into bankruptcy.

Andy DiSabatino, an admirer of the Pei building, says the company has sometimes not bid on other projects because it did not have the right project managers available and lost the possibility for repeat business. Even so, EDiS is known for much of its business coming from repeat customers



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Harry's Seafood and A.I. duPont Middle School are two landmark buildings in the EDiS portfolio.

## Event honors past and present employees of EDiS

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who came away with a positive experience the first time around.

In recent years, aging schools and population growth have kept EDiS busy in the education construction arena. That area is likely to slow as Delaware faces declining tax revenues.

In 1995, EDiS made a smooth transition to the fourth generation, with E. Andrew DiSabatino, Jr. serving as Chief Executive Officer and Richard and Paul DiSabatino retiring. Richard P. DiSabatino, Jr. son of Richard Sr. and Brian DiSabatino, son of Paul E. DiSabatino serve on the executive team.

In 2005, E. Andrew DiSabatino, III joined the company as the first member of the fifth generation.

The transition to the fourth generation was marked by the introduction of the Generation III Scholarship Fund by EDiS in honor of the third generation of DiSabatinos and their contribution to the company. The scholarships are awarded annually. The company also launched the EDiS Institute in honor of their 90th Anniversary in 1998. The event, held every other year, features national speakers on important trends in the construction industry. Proceeds from the event go to support vocational-technical education.

Richard and Andy DiSabatino, Jr. says a variety of strategies and circumstances helped keep the company together during the transitions.

Most obvious is the fact that clear management transitions took place. Family members did not stay on in executive roles, after the next generation of executives took the reins. In addition, fathers and sons never work together. The sheer size of the family may have reduced some conflicts.

Cousins who later worked together in the business often did not always know each other very well growing up, due to the number of members of their immediate family.

EDiS is celebrating its 100th anniversary throughout 2008. The company held an event for all employees past and present and showed it had not forgotten its roots. In honor of its first century, the company donated \$100,000 to St. Anthony of Padua Church.

Brian DiSabatino says the future looks bright for the company.

With the demise of locally owned competitors, EDiS knew it would see more competition from regional and even international companies in Delaware.

The company decided to expand regionally, opening an office in West Chester, Pa. to serve Chester, Bucks and Montgomery counties and picking up work in the three areas.

While the EDiS brand is firmly established in Delaware, the company has spent the last five years building its brand in the suburban Philadelphia counties.

Brian DiSabatino says the com-

pany is investing in the Pennsylvania community with locally based staff and involvement in charitable activities.

It is also becoming a "green business."

"We have to walk the walk," says Brian DiSabatino. That includes more recycling of materials at construction sites to operating in a "paperless" environment. It also involves gaining LEED certification in green building practices.

While going paperless will take years of work, Brian says the company is "well down the road" to reaching the goal.

In the meantime, another goal of the company, a diverse array of products and services is paying off

The company's Butler pre-engineered building business is already approaching its sales goal for 2008, Brian DiSabatino says.

With budgets tightening, more economical school buildings are a possibility, particularly for elementary schools.

Brian says the company would like to be part of any demonstration project that would use pre-engineered buildings that are visually indistinguishable from other structures and may not need to last for 70 years or more.

Such buildings are widely used in charter, private and parochial schools.

For further information on the 100th anniversary and a timetable of the history of the company, log on to [edis.com-company.com](http://edis.com-company.com).

## EDiS divisions

- EDiS Development - Develops commercial projects.
- EDiS Interior Construction - Interior work for new and existing buildings.
- EDiS Building Systems - Constructs Butler pre-engineered building systems. Division has shown strong growth.
- Asset Management Alliance - Manages buildings for clients.
- EDiS Company - Construction manager operating in Delaware and neighboring counties in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

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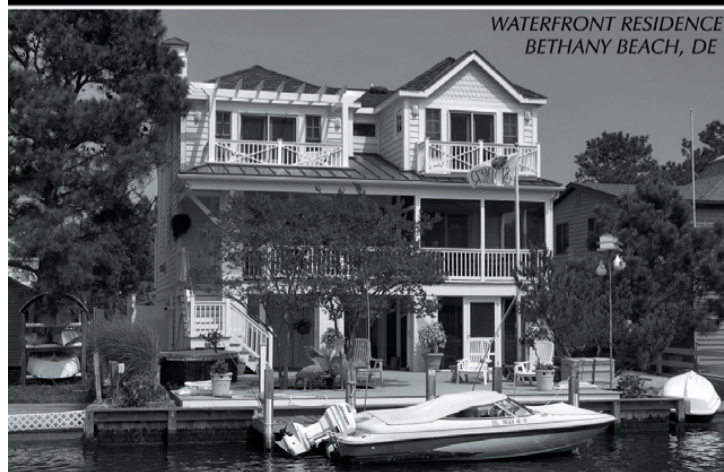


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