

The Mass Appeal of Dubuque Religious Center

40 YEARS IN THE MAKING, IT CONTINUES TO GROW

Little did Tim Sullivan know that when his parents, James and Mary Lou Sullivan, opened a small religious store 40 years ago that it would be an integral part of his life.

He had no plans to work full-time at Dubuque Religious Center -- and was surprised later when he was suddenly put in charge.

In the 1970s, James worked as a candle salesman in Iowa. Transferred to California, he worked there for three years, but longed to return to Iowa and find a profession that had more potential.

"My dad had a friend who owned a religious store in Davenport," Sullivan said. "He asked my dad about starting one in Dubuque and said that they could go in as partners. Dad knew a lot of people in this type of work who sold candles and other items like vestments. So he had a lot of contacts in the area of religious goods. They started the business in August 1976. After a couple years my dad bought him out."

While the business might seem like a niche market, it would prove to be a sound investment. Sullivan admits that today his parents would have had a much tougher time of starting the business.

"There was definitely a market for it at the time. There were just a few Christian bookstores, here and there, but that was it. Now if you started something like this today I'm not sure how it would go. It would be harder to get going."

From the beginning Sullivan would be involved in the business, even though he was in high school.

"I started the first day it opened. My brother worked here, as well. I was working part-time. I would come down after school and work right away and work on the weekends. I'd be marking the merchandise or doing deliveries."

For all the time he spent at the store, Sullivan had no thoughts of it being his future. He would attend Loras College, earning a marketing degree.

"I had some interviews after college in Chicago and Minneapolis. They didn't really pan out and my dad said 'Why don't you come work for me?' It was the best thing I ever did."

What helped to sustain the store and help keep it from being a gift shop was James' decision to become a supplier to area Catholic churches, providing nearly everything they needed for a service.

They also created a catalog. Working off a few tables, they began to ship items to churches all over the area. Today, the catalog is more than 370 pages. There is a second, smaller catalog, for Protestants.

"We go to Chicago every year for a week and see suppliers from all over the world and then decide what will go into the catalog. You'll find anything you see in a church, from the wine to the altar bread to the vestments, and candles."

Although the bulk of the business is with churches, it serves other institutions.

It supplies schools, convents, hospitals, funeral homes and occasionally the military. Most are in a 90-mile radius, but through its catalog it reaches churches and institutions throughout the Midwest. It has between 700-800 accounts.

Lent and Easter is one of the biggest seasons as it supplies churches with the palms they use on Palm Sunday. The back room, which is kept cool, is full of palms that it either delivers or ships via UPS.

As far as the front of the store, the retail business gets a steady flow of foot traffic. It is most busy during Easter season and Christmas, as well as for First Holy Communion, confirmations and baptisms.

When a priest or pastor starts at a church, it doesn't take them long before they learn of the Dubuque Religious Store.

"I probably know 99 percent of the priests," Sullivan said. "When a priest or pastor starts a new assignment at a church they already know about us or hear about us from the other pastors and priests. That's word-of-mouth reputation."

Sullivan praises his dad's efforts.

"I have to give all the credit to my Dad. His motto was always 'fast dependable service'. When someone calls with an order we try to get it to them as fast as we can. If we have to order it and we don't have it in a week, then we'll be on the phone to that company asking where it's at. Some suppliers are in Paris and Belgium so for that it will take a little longer, but customers know that. It's just good all-around service that has kept us going."

For the past 19 years, the business has been Sullivan's. The transition in running the company was smooth, but unexpected.

"One day I was just in the back doing something when he suddenly came back," said Sullivan. "He said 'Why don't you come down to my desk and I'll work back here? You can take over the place.' There were a few things I didn't know like the paying of bills, but for the most part it was an easy transition. Dad was a workaholic and thought he'd work here until he died, which he did, (July 2013). But I wasn't expecting him to step down like he did. It was kind of funny."

The recession had almost no impact on the business, nor has the closing of churches in the area.





In the past you might have had 200 active priests and now we have less than 100," Sullivan said. "We have a lot more deacons in their place. The business has been fairly steady the last 15 years, maybe even growing a bit. A lot of churches have closed, but the demand has stayed the same."

For those looking to go into business, Sullivan again returns to the work ethic his father instilled in him.

"Plan to work your tail off. You're going to have to dedicate yourself and put long hours in on the business and the marketing of it. Give good service. I've seen statistics where people start new businesses and maybe 15 percent make it. So you have to know what type of business you want to do and see how competitive it is before you start."