

INSPIRING ENTREPRENEUR With 35 years of business success behind him, GENE GOMBERG mentors others along similar paths

BY SUSAN CUMINS

PHOTO BY SCHERLEY BUSCH



Thirty-five years ago Gene Gomberg was a lone entrepreneur just out of college. Today he is co-founder and CEO of The Continental Group, a Hollywood based property management company that does \$250 million a year in businesses by offering extensive service options to condominiums and homeowner associations in Florida. Continental became a subsidiary of FirstService in Toronto in 1997, a move that expanded its reach to the Northeast, Chicago, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Dallas, and California.

The Coconut Grove resident grew up in Pittsburgh, but made Miami his home after moving here to study at the University of Miami. While completing a bachelor's degree in education, an unexpected career path presented itself. His grass-mowing and pool-cleaning job at a condo building mushroomed into janitorial and maintenance work for multiple community associations. This now-familiar service industry was in its infancy here in the early 1970s.

"After college the business was a novel idea," says Gomberg. "A year and a half down the road I had an old school bus, painted lime green with Disney characters on it, that I used to haul employees and equipment. Thirty years later people still talk about that bus," he chuckles.

Gomberg established GDG Services, Inc. in 1973. When he sold it in 1985, GDG had 1,000 employees. Five years later he and partner Richard Strunin co-founded The Continental Group. As president, Strunin handles back office support and the details that go into driving the huge company. Gomberg's role is to shape the company's vision, keep it growing, and work with employees and partners.

In Florida, Continental manages and maintains more than 1,200 condominium and homeowner association communities, representing 300,000 residential units. They employ some 5,200 people from Key West to Jacksonville.

"In the service business, there is no possibility of being successful without good people," Gomberg states. "They came for a job and we turned it into a career. We're really proud that hundreds of our people have been with us for 20 to 25 years. They are loyal to us, and so are our clients. We have a 97 percent client retention rate."

He sees no end to opportunity in South Florida's real estate market, where a single building might contain four types of clients: owners, investors, developers and renters.

"No matter what the economy is doing, maintenance services must go on. Buildings with excess inventory need competent management, even more than occupied buildings," he says. "When a developer is sitting with inventory, investors – those who close because they have no option of flipping – want to maintain value. The best alternative for those accidental owners is to rent their units out."

Continental is prepared to handle as many or as few of a client's needs as it is assigned. "We want to keep each property maintained so the owner's investment value is not going south, and the unit will be salable when the time comes." Continental can supply engineers, personnel to cover

the front desk, concierge, housekeeping, project management and back office administration.

Gomberg may have put his education degree aside, but he mentors aspiring entrepreneurs. Faye M. Harris, director of alumni relations at the UM School of Business, invited Gomberg to join its mentor program after he participated in the school's business ethics speaker series in spring 2005.

"Gene was outstanding in the exploration of business ethics and corporate social responsibility, and has been equally outstanding as a mentor," Harris notes. "We recruit alums selectively to match their careers with those our students have indicated interest in. Gene is a very inspiring entrepreneur!" Mentee Aaron Greenblott credits Gomberg's advice with helping him capture first prize in the high-potential venture category of the school's Rothschild Entrepreneurship Competition.

Continental Cares Quarterly Service Project gets employees involved in charitable initiatives. About 70 participated in a cystic fibrosis walkathon in Hollywood Beach this year, and 60 volunteers used their maintenance skills to rehab a Miami residence for young women being aged out of foster care. The next project will benefit children in Orlando through Make-a-Wish, says Gloria Romero-Roses, Continental's director of communications and community relations.

"Success in my business is about integrity, value and ethics," Gomberg says. "With the number of hats you wear, you are going to screw up sometimes. Then you apologize quickly and move ahead. With 300,000 units in Miami and an average of two residents in each, that is a lot of people who expect something from you. You need an iron constitution, but most people are pretty nice. You establish relationships based on mutual respect. There are a lot of good people here in Miami."