

BUSINESS

Tiny Milwaukee firm has the world looking up (at its tiles)



Hector Rodriguez pours a mixture of water, plaster, fillers and fiberglass into a mold at Above View, a Milwaukee company that makes decorative ceiling tiles that have been installed in gambling halls and other buildings in four continents. Credit: Rick Wood

By Rick Romell of the Journal Sentinel

It's almost a reflex now when John Tesensky walks into a building.

"The first thing I do," he said, "is look up."

When you're running a company that makes decorative ceiling tiles installed in places from Yonkers, N.Y., to Perth, Australia, you keep an eye out for every opportunity.

Tesensky is the recently installed president of [Above View](#), a Milwaukee firm that is small (just nine employees) and little known, but which has left its mark on ceilings in four continents.

Walk into a casino in the United States and there's a decent chance you'll see Above View tiles. Nearly 2 million square feet worth of them hover in gambling halls — enough to cover about 35 football fields.

Over 31 years, the firm, 4750 S. 10th St., has carved out a niche as a producer of plaster composite tiles that are molded into intricate shapes yet are light enough to be hung in suspended ceiling frames.

"They're very well-known," said Dan Doran, senior project designer at Tandem, a Las Vegas-based interior design firm.

But just a few months ago, Above View was thrown into crisis when the company's two founders, Nina Kuper and Janis Kalnajs, died within 90 days of each other.

An artist schooled in the craft of decorative plaster at Milwaukee's Orlandini Studios Ltd., Kalnajs developed a patented system that opened up new possible uses for fancy plaster ceiling tiles.

His method involved mixing plaster with vermiculite, perlite and fiberglass, yielding tiles that could still be molded intricately but weighed 60% less than their all-plaster counterparts.

It was a good idea — the foundation of the company. But Kalnajs had no head for business. That was Kuper's domain. For decades, she handled marketing and sales while he oversaw design and production in their little factory.

Then, last October, Kuper died, at age 67. Kalnajs was left adrift.

"When Nina passed away, my uncle was like, 'Oh my gosh...what do I do? I don't have the business sense,'" Linda Wilhelms said.

Wilhelms is Kalnajs' niece, and as a longtime residential real estate investor, had a wealth of business experience. Her husband, Dan, meanwhile, had recently sold an information technology firm, Symmetry Corp., that he started in 1996.

Dan Wilhelms advised Kalnajs to contact Tesensky, a certified public accountant who had been a consultant to many Milwaukee-area companies, including Symmetry.

Tesensky had never heard of Above View, which intrigued him. Here was a local firm with an unusual product and strong standing in its field, operating below the radar.

Reasons for the anonymity soon emerged: Above View's approach to marketing had been relatively casual. The most recent printed literature dated to 1995. Many of the photos on the website were more than 15 years old. The firm's standing ad in *Metropolis*, a leading architecture and design magazine, hadn't changed since the mid-'80s.

And with Kuper gone, the company — which does business as Above View but formally is named Tiles Inc. — clearly needed attention to sales.

Tesensky was helping Kalnajs chart a course forward when, in January, Kalnajs died, too. He was 70 and had no children. The business went to Linda Wilhelms, his oldest niece.

"Who could have thought," she said of the unusual chain of events. "I mean, honestly, this came out of the blue. ...At first I was astounded, but on the other hand, I was just extremely excited."

Tesensky was interested, too. Since 2004, he had worked at Lauber CFOs, which provides financial officers to client companies on a consulting basis. Above View looked like a promising firm to guide on a more-permanent basis. Wilhelms hired him as president.

To handle sales and marketing, they brought in Margaret Howland, who had been marketing director at Brass Light Gallery for nine years.

One constant has been Above View's long-tenured production staff.

"The guys in our plant have been here I think an average of 18 years, with the plant manager coming up on a 29th anniversary," Howland said.

"They've been continuing to make the product all along while things were disrupted as far as sales and marketing."

They pour the mix of water, plaster, fillers and fiberglass into rubber molds that are wetted down so the finished tiles release easily. It takes about nine minutes for the mixture to set, with workers placing the molds briefly on a vibrating table to eliminate tiny air bubbles.

The fiberglass binds and strengthens the finished product. With the vermiculite (a mineral used by many gardeners) and perlite (a white rock that looks like bits of Styrofoam) a 2-foot by 2-foot tile weighs 8½ to 9 pounds.

"If we made the tile out of pure plaster, the tile would weigh about 25 pounds," said plant manager Mark Szocik, a former Patrick Cudahy worker who decided after that company's bitter strike in the 1980s that he had no future killing and butchering hogs.

Upstairs, in a workshop bathed in northern light from a long bank of windows, Szocik and co-worker Andrés Bectrán design tile patterns. Above View has about 100 designs — Gothic Tegular, Mayan Flower and English Lamb's Tongue among them. The masters, made of pure plaster, rest in cases in the workshop.

The shop can produce as many as 300 tiles a day.

"We see a lot of market potential here," Tesensky said. "It's just that some of these markets have not been tapped and tapped properly."

Howland is looking to go beyond casinos and get Above View tiles in places such as high schools, universities and government structures.

"I think there's really great opportunity in institutional buildings," she said.

She'll also be probing for more business at HD Expo, a trade show for hospitality industry design professionals, which was held last week in Las Vegas.

"We're kind of on a mission to remove the bland, barren ceiling tiles," Tesensky said.