

The Class of 2008

By [George O'Brien](#) on May 26, 2008

Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame Announces Inductees



When businesses stay in the same family for several generations, there are usually lots of old photographs on walls, atop credenzas, or in desk drawers, and so it is with the Western Mass. Entrepreneurship Hall of Fames Class of 2008. And as the saying goes, they speak a thousand words.

Belmont Laundry (the Samble Family)

Harry Samble, founder of Belmont Laundry, making some deliveries. When asked about his grandfather, Robert Samble Jr. started by pointing.

That's him, he said, gesturing toward a framed photograph sitting on a shelf in his crowded office. Somewhat faded by time, the image is of a man sitting behind the wheel of a delivery truck bearing the name Belmont Laundry, circa 1915. That's Harry Samble, he started all this with grandma.

That's her there, he continued, pointing to another picture, this one on a higher shelf. She ran it for years with my father after grandpa died.

And that's my father there," he went on, pointing to a picture of a man in uniform standing next to a P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane. That's from his days in the Army Air Corps during World War II."

Before moving on to that truck, Harry Samble picked up and dropped off laundry on his bicycle and, later, a horse and buggy.

In those days, his service was called ‘ wet wash, said Robert Samble, noting that his grandparents would pick up laundry, wash it, and bring it back to the customer wet, to be dried on a line outside. This line of work has evolved considerably over the years, he continued, adding that Belmont now has a fleet of trucks and more than 50 employees, and handles more than 1,000 commercial accounts in a service area stretching from Newport, R.I. to Pittsfield.

How it arrived at this state is a story of perseverance, vision, and dedication to customer service, he explained. To emphasize this point, he stopped at a pair of recently cleaned uniform pants soon to be returned to a commercial client. Turning the waist back, he revealed a radio frequency identification (RFID) tag implanted within. Each item has one, said Samble, to ensure that every shirt, pair of pants, physicians coat, or commercial floor mat goes where its supposed to go.

“ The big outfits don’t do this, because its expensive and they don’t want to spend that kind of money on customer service, he said, adding that Belmont has been taking such steps since Harry and Corrine Samble set up shop in 1907 in a barn on the location where the headquarters building still stands today.

Harry Samble died when his son, Robert, was only 14, pressing the second generation of the family into a large role within the business at an early age. For many years, Robert Samble and his mother ran the business, along with one of Harry Samble’s brothers, who was later bought out.

Robert Samble Jr. is a little sketchy on some of the history, because he never met his grandfather and his father died in 1967, when Robert was just 14. It was then that Robert’s mother, Dorothy, who had not been involved in the business at all while her husband was alive, essentially took over and kept the doors open.

“ If it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t be here today, said Robert, adding that, in 1973, his mother was able to convince him to change careers (he had been a refractory mason) and join the family business.

Since then, he has orchestrated significant growth —the company has added locations in Agawam, West Springfield, Longmeadow, and a second store in Springfield —and diversification. He’s been joined in the business by sons Matthew, now project manager, and Derek, the dry-cleaning division manager, and stepdaughter April Caruso, who is supervisor of counter staff.

Commercial work, which now accounts for roughly 75% of Belmont’s business, remains strong, said Samble, but the retail side of the ledger has been soft in recent years, a trend he attributes to more-casual dress in the workplace, among other factors.

“ People aren’t dressing up like they used to,” he explained, adding quickly that the company will persevere, whether that trend changes or not. It has endured for 101 years because its been able to add new wrinkles or iron them out, as the case may be.

The Class of 2008 was introduced at a reception staged May 22 at the Colony Club, and the new inductees will be honored at the annual Hall of Fame dinner on Oct. 2 at the Log Cabin Banquet and Meeting House.