

GMI keeps family security business strong over generations

By ELIZABETH MALLOY , The Daily Transcript
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Larry Abrams knows that a lot of his employees are commonly derided as "rent-a-cops," or "janitors," but he doesn't see them that way, and he doesn't want them to themselves that way either.

Abrams is the president and chief executive officer of **GMI**, a San Diego company that provides security, janitorial and construction services to industrial, retail, residential and other buildings around Southern California. The company has grown consistently in recent years, and Abrams said that treating people -- both customers and employees -- with respect has been a key to GMI's success.

"(We) teach our staff that their jobs are extremely important," Abrams said. "Whether it be the security officer who saves a life, who knows how to properly use a (defibrillator), or the janitor who practices proper disinfection and cleaning techniques that can prevent a pandemic.

"They have an impact on people's lives," he said.

Nearly a dozen people hoping to be GMI employees were filling out applications at the company's Kearny Mesa headquarters on a recent day this summer. With California's unemployment rate hovering close to 12 percent, GMI represents a rare company with frequent openings, though Abrams was quick to point out that turnover at his company is lower than the industry standard.

GMI employs about 900 people, with field offices through San Diego and Orange Counties, as well as the Inland Empire.



Larry Abrams is the president and chief executive officer of GMI. Photo: J. Kat Woronowicz

Larry Abrams' father, Murray bought the company in 1972, shortly after the family moved to San Diego from Connecticut. Murray had owned a janitorial and window cleaning company back east, and wanted to buy a similar business here.

He found Guardian Maintenance Inc., from which GMI takes its name. It was only a cleaning company at the time, but when a client said he was looking for security staff in the early 1980s, Murray Abrams hired a former Oceanside police chief to help him expand the company into security.

GMI's security guards are not armed and are generally asked to "observe and report" rather than apprehend suspected criminals. But that doesn't mean they're not engaged. They can and have apprehended people. Several have saved people lives with first aid. At this year's Comic-Con, GMI security guards helped with line control and general safety.

Larry Abrams had never planned on going into the family business. He was working for a marketing company after graduating from San Diego State University, but in 1988, his father wanted to sell the company. The younger Abrams wanted to help build up the business so his father could sell it for enough for him and wife to retire on, and once he joined, he never left.

Larry Abrams started working on the janitorial side, and gradually moved into the security side as well.

"Before I knew it I was sucked into the business," Abrams said with a laugh.

In the early 1990s, after clients started requesting janitorial crews to do more heavy maintenance, Abrams began expanding into construction. GMI generally only handles small construction jobs, repairs that are beyond the scope of a handyman, but less than major renovations or additions.

Murray Abrams died in 2001, after granting his son control of the company. Since 2000, Abrams said, the business has grown about 20 percent each year.

"I've really come to the realization as I've grown and matured that at the end of the day, security and janitorial and construction might not be glamorous businesses, if you will, but their service offerings are needed and fairly recession resistant," he said.

Abrams said that offering different services, and being able to offer varying price models to clients, GMI has been able to weather the current economic storm.

While GMI is structured to provide as many services as possible to its clients, the office's Kearny Mesa headquarters is all about its employees. The company has several buildings there where it houses, cleans and fixes equipment, and the buildings also house classrooms.

GMI workers are sent to "boot camp" where they learn the ins and outs of their jobs, and they're also encouraged to keep taking training courses throughout their employment. Some can earn vacation days by attending certain training courses.

One of the classrooms where security guards are trained has a wall covered in recognitions for individual guards, like a man who saved another man's life with a defibrillator, and a woman who dived into a pool in full uniform to save a child who had fallen in.

Abrams said these recognitions, coupled with more concrete rewards like a 401K matching plan and interior promotions, are what keep his employees staying at their jobs for 10 to 15 years in some cases, a rarity for the security and janitorial business.

"The primary philosophy of the company is 'People plus service equals success,'" Abrams said. "Typically, it's all about profits, then service then people, and it seems that that's kind of an inverted way of looking at it. Our business is really all about people."

"If we take care of our employees, and we take care of our customers -- the people element, if you will -- provide great service, the end result will be a successful relationship," he added.