

Business Profile: Elsa's doesn't sleep

Written by Nneka Serwaa
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Elsa's House of Sleep, the Twin Cities' oldest Black-owned furniture business, has survived light rail construction and its share of economic downturns, but despite it all, the business has excelled and has since expanded into Minneapolis.

Tetra Constantino, owner, said that 2013 marks 17 years that his family has operated the original outlet, 1441 University Ave. W. in the Midway area of Saint Paul. The name comes from founder, Elsa Rezene, the mother of Constantino, who came to Minnesota in 1966 from Asmara, Eritrea. Rezene was an entrepreneurial spirited woman who started her first business in 1971 just after high school when she began selling beads, oil, incense, jewelry, and hand-made clothing. In 1997 that transformed into furniture, unique rugs, artwork, and lamps, which Elsa's still offers to this day.

Tetra attests that Rezene's legacy can still be found in the customer experience at Elsa's House of Sleep. Up until the time when Rezene lost her battle to cancer in 2004, customers would find her smiling, connecting with people, assisting customers, and making furniture deliveries. The family keeps her legacy alive today by treating customers like extended family. Constantino said most of Elsa's clientele is the result of repeat business, and at Elsa's the best advertising is word of mouth. Elsa's staff has neither forgotten the outstanding service its namesake offered, nor the warm feeling she always left with her customers.

Subsequently, 10 family members, including Elsa's three children and her sister have all held key positions within the company and have been important to its success. Most of the sales, customer service and delivery team have been part of the Elsa family for many years and makes work enjoyable, according to Constantino.

The original real estate that the store sits on today was found by Rezene and later purchased by Constantino. Constantino credits the current success and direction of the business to his mother's vision.

"Under her leadership I was inspired to do the things that have been done and many more that have yet to be accomplished," said Constantino. "We have purchased the real estate at our current location at 1441 University Avenue and expanded to our second location at 3540 East Lake Street."

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In conjunction with steady business growth, Elsa's has maintained a consistent focus on meeting the needs of customers on a budget. In recent years it began allowing customers to put items on layaway for up to six months without additional fees and it offers different financing options.

"We don't have a huge showroom, so we allow customers to see our offerings in online catalogs. Because we keep our overhead low we pass those savings on to (the customer)," said Constantino. "The only thing we ask in return is repeat business if we've earned it. And tell your friends about us, as well."

Constantino went on to comment that he looks forward to the next 17 years and beyond and that he is thankful to the customers that keep coming back and referring others.

When asked about how tough it was to run his mom's store after her passing, Constantino said that it was very difficult for his family and those who knew her, but the family looks to her legacy for motivation and strength when things get tough. Constantino credits Elsa's survival to a commitment to community. Many stores have come and gone in the Midway area of Saint Paul, but Elsa's is still going strong thanks to its community-based clientele.

"We didn't have to cut costs and quality when competition moved in because our customers, know – expect and anticipate – that we will provide the best price for the same furniture and even better customer service," said Constantino.

The Saint Paul location is open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. The Minneapolis store is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday but closed on Sundays.

For more on Elsa's visit www.elsasfurniture.com or call (651) 647-0225 or (612) 367-8941.