

Going to the chapel

Montalbano furniture factory combines faith and work

By Miranda Lesser
For Press Publications

Over 20 years ago, when Richard Montalbano, president of Montalbano Majestic Furniture in Bellwood, walked down the hallway of a factory similar to the one owned by his family, he was struck by a unique idea.

"Halfway down the hallway, there was a little door that said 'chapel' on it," said Montalbano, an Oak Brook resident. "I went inside, and it was a little cubicle, 5 feet by 5 feet, but it was a place where a worker could go and meditate, or say a prayer. I thought that the chapel was a wonderful idea, and decided that someday I'd like to have that in my own factory."

And that "someday" did indeed come.

Montalbano built St. Joseph's Chapel into the heart of the family's furniture factory in Humboldt Park in 1977. In 1987, the factory moved to its current location at 3000 St. Charles Road in Bellwood. The chapel moved with it, and was then enlarged and remodeled.

For 22 years, the Montalbano family has believed in letting factory

workers and the general public come and worship and attend Mass on their premises.

"We believe in helping people," Montalbano said. "If we have helped even one person by having a chapel, then it was worth building it."

Proud history

Montalbano Majestic Furniture is the oldest manufacturer, importer and restorer of solid wood-carved French, Provincial and Baroque style furniture in the world.

They have been in business since 1929, and the 88-year-old owner and founder, Thomas Montalbano, is the oldest practicing woodworker in the nation. "My father will be 89 on Christmas Day," said Richard Montalbano. "And he'll probably be in here working to celebrate!"

Three generations of the Montalbano family work in the factory, six days a week — Thomas Montalbano; his wife, Patricia, who oversees the bookkeeping; their son, Richard, president of the company; and his sons, 28-year-old Rick and 24-year-old Mark, who work in the office.

"It's wonderful to see our family here in the factory day after day," said Richard Montalbano. "We've had some rough times over the years, but we hope that our factory, and the chapel, will be around forever."

The chapel resides in the center of the 130,000-square-foot factory. It has two doors, one leading in from the front of the factory showroom, the other leading out to the factory floor.

Each piece of furniture in the Catholic chapel, which is dedicated to St. Joseph, patron saint of woodworkers, tells a story. From the hand-carved and painted statues that cover the altar, to the kneeling benches that were rescued from a junkyard and painstakingly restored.

The solid walnut altar was the first piece of furniture in the chapel. Richard Montalbano bought the altar from, a furniture company in Chicago that was going out of business.

The pews are antiques, rescued from a Catholic church in Kenosha, Wis., that was scheduled to be demolished. The pictures and relics on the walls date back to as early as the 1800s, with one

particular piece of art that is the first of only 12 by the same artist in the world and the only one in the United States.

"We try and represent not only the Catholic faith, but other faiths as well," said Montalbano. "We have over 250 relics of different saints throughout the chapel, each one hand-carved, and we also have artifacts of Judaism and Islam."

One of the most treasured pieces in the chapel is a life-size hand-carved statue of St. Rocco Di Valenzano, which is carried on the shoulders of worshipers once a year for the feast of St. Rocco, as is done in Italy.

The chapel, which has a standing-room capacity of 100, holds between 35 and 40 Masses a year for its almost 20 regular attendees. The Rev. Tom Vermiglio, who is the head of the Comboni Mission Center in the neighborhood, officiates, and Sister Lynn plays the organ for people who want to sing.

"Apart from the Masses, the chapel has housed two weddings, two baptisms and a funeral service in its 22-year existence," said Montalbano. "It's wonderful

to see that people are using our place of worship."

Although St. Joseph's Chapel holds Masses every year, it does not operate on Sundays.

"It's unfortunate that we aren't able to open the doors on Sundays," said Montalbano, "but people have gotten used to worshipping on other days. I guess it just goes along with the uniqueness of the whole concept of a chapel in a factory in the first place!"

Help ethic

Apart from the chapel, the Montalbano family believes in helping the people of the community in any way they can.

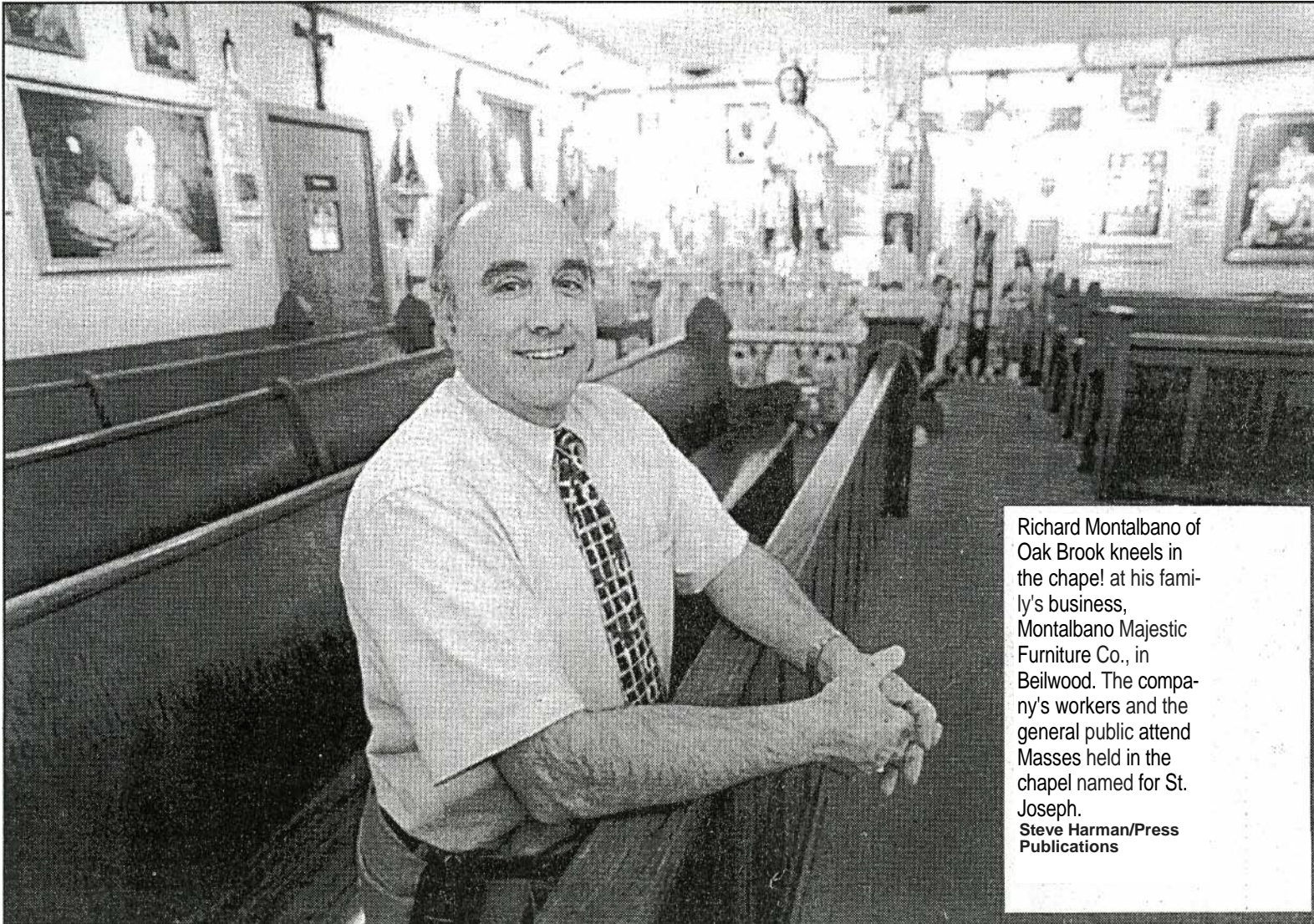
"When you've been around as long as we have, you understand how important it is to give back to the community," said Montalbano. Each year, the furniture company hosts a picnic for the developmentally disabled people in the area. Hundreds of people turn out annually for the picnic, which is held at the rear of the four-and-a-half acre Montalbano property.

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Richard Montalbano of Oak Brook kneels in the chapel at his family's business, Montalbano Majestic Furniture Co., in Beilwood. The company's workers and the general public attend Masses held in the chapel named for St. Joseph.
Steve Harman/Press Publications

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The company also donates its fabric scraps to a Lutheran group who sews them into blankets and school bags for needy families. The Montalbano family has also donated statues and various other religious artifacts that did not fit in their own chapel, to churches in the area, including the Visitation Church in Ehnurst.

"My parents instilled in me the idea that life isn't complete unless you give to others who are not as fortunate as you," Montalbano said.

Richard Montalbano was in fact knighted six years ago to the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem.

"The only wish I have is that I could have been knighted 150 years ago, when knights could give clemency to anyone, ride into churches on horseback and fight with swords," he said.

The future for Montalbano Majestic Furniture and St. Joseph's Chapel is bright, according to Montalbano.

"We now have a fourth generation of family we can train in the business," he said. "We hope that they can continue our 70-year tradition, and continue our chapel, long after we're gone."