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**JIM  
SUNDERJI**  
and the creation  
of a

*Dynasty*



# Creating a DYNAS

The word “dynasty” is a lofty, elegant one imparting tradition, intergenerational co-operation and profound staying power. For that reason, it’s fitting entrepreneur and philanthropist Jim Sunderji, founder of Dynasty Furniture, was named the 2015 recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance. Under his leadership, this upholstery maker has grown into a two-location powerhouse with a workforce of 600 people. **BY ASHLEY NEWPORT**



Jim and Rosy Sunderji are seen here in the administrative centre of Dynasty Furniture in Calgary.

**J**N EARLY JUNE, ZAHER ‘JIM’ SUNDERJI WILL JOIN A SMALL, exclusive club with less two dozen members when he accepts the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Canadian Home Furnishings Alliance at a gala dinner being held in his honour.

The Tanzania-born founder of the Calgary-based Dynasty Furniture will join a select group that includes the late Orville Mead, president of Durham Furniture; Pat Thody, formerly president of mattress major Simmons Canada; Richard Magnussen, chairman of Magnussen Home; Art DeFehr, chairman of Palliser Furniture; and, last year’s honouree, Bob Kay, chairman of mattress specialist Springwall Sleep Products.

The CHFA established the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000 to recognize those individuals who over their lifetime have made exemplary and sustained contributions to the Canadian furniture and home furnishings industry as well as the communities in which they live.

It doesn’t just honour someone who has persevered and succeeded in what can be (and is) a challenging and ever-changing industry. It recognizes someone who has not only grown and sustained a successful business – which Sunderji certainly has – but who has also contributed positively to the local and, in his case, the worldwide community.

After getting to know him, it makes sense Sunderji has chosen to support the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), an organisation working with underprivileged communities in Africa, South and Central Asia as he, himself, is very much a citizen of the world.

The company's main plant in Calgary has about 340,000 square feet of production and office space. In all, Dynasty employs some 600 people.

TY



“I was born in Tanzania and I moved to Canada in 1971,” the 67-year old Sunderji explains over the phone, having carved out time to call from India, where he was traveling with his wife – someone he credits as being central both to his personal and to Dynasty’s long-lasting success – Rosy. “I went into the furniture business in 1975 after getting an electrical engineering degree from the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT).”

The jump from engineering to furniture might seem strange, until its realised the Sunderji family has a long and storied history in the global furniture market, bringing considerable experience and expertise with them when immigrating to Canada.

Sunderji and all three of his brothers became well-acquainted with the industry while living in East Africa. Their father had always worked in furniture and, along with imparting trade secrets, also drove home the importance of strong business ethics and solid relationships.

“My father worked in the furniture industry in Africa,” Sunderji says. “We all had mattress backgrounds. In 1975, we bought a Therapedic Sleep

Products franchise and started a plant in Calgary. I soon realised there was a need for upholstery manufacturing in Canada and in 1979 I went into [that sector].”

Eventually, all four Sunderji brothers decided to tackle different product categories within the industry while he focused on upholstery. (One brother, Dean, is the president and chief executive officer of promotional case goods producer Dynamic Furniture.)

“My father had a retail store in Tanzania and also what we called a cottage mattress industry where he had employed people to build mattresses. He sold them in his retail store. My brother Sam had a British mattress franchise in Nairobi (Kenya) called Vono. In 1975, when we first went into mattress manufacturing business, it was a joint decision between my brothers and me.

“After becoming familiar with the furniture industry in Canada I realized there was a need for upholstery manufacturing plant in western Canada,” Sunderji continues, “and I diversified into furniture manufacturing and that is how Dynasty Furniture was started in 1979.” ▶

Faizel and Karina Sunderji (standing at top left) are seen with management team at Dynasty Furniture. Seated at bottom right are Rosy and Jim Sunderji.



Dynasty is one of the few Canadian furniture makers operating production facilities in both Western and Eastern Canada. Seen here is its 200,000 square foot plant in Mississauga, Ontario.



Top: Jim Sunderji is very involved in the Aga Khan's education service, particularly with the Rural Education Advancement Program (REAP), in Gujarat, India. This project provides quality pre-primary education including health, hygiene, and community awareness services.

Middle: Rosy and Jim Sunderji are seen here with a group of pre-kindergarten aged children who are taking part in the Rural Education Advancement Program, organised by the Aga Khan.

Jim Sunderji still enjoys the business.

"I enjoy what I do. The business is very interesting and challenging. Over the years, I have met some very nice people and some of them have grown with me. It is a very satisfying feeling to see others grow as well. It is hard to believe I have been in furniture business for 40 years."

Over the past 36 years, Dynasty has grown exponentially. What was once a small western Canadian operation located in a 10,000 square foot building with a modest (but still impressive) 30 employees has grown to employ over 600 people in two manufacturing facilities. In 1984, the company stretched eastward and opened a plant in Mississauga, Ontario. The GTA location boasts 200,000 square feet of space and employs over 150 people while the Calgary plant – which Dynasty moved to in 1985 – occupies a spacious 340,000 square feet.

Indeed, Dynasty may be the only upholstery maker in this country with manufacturing capacity in both Western and Eastern Canada.

The company has also kept up with the times. Emphasizing the importance of style, the brand offers fashion-forward fabrics in various colours, shades and textures and allows customers generous customization options. Customers can even mix and match fabrics and textures online to get a feel for the furniture outside of the showroom.

While no doubt a great success story – and one that remains very much a family concern with son Faizel and his wife Karina taking charge of daily operations – Sunderji is honest about the challenges the company is facing. He also thinks change can be beneficial.



*"[Charitable] work is satisfying and it has a huge impact on me and my wife and family. It's satisfying to see young children do what they could not do otherwise."*

"Dynasty started from scratch," he says. "We've been through changes with NAFTA and far east imports. It makes the industry interesting. We've had to survive challenges. We've also seen a lot of variety in the furniture itself, especially as we're exposed to different furniture from around the world. In 1979, it was all from the U.S. Now there's some from Italy and the east, especially in the last 10 years."

## THE JOURNEY TO DYNASTY

You would be forgiven for wondering whether working in the furniture industry in Africa could truly prepare someone for operating a similar business in Canada. The cultural differences between Canada and Tanzania can be vast and difficult to navigate. Everything from the manufacturing process to customer service can vary. That said, Sunderji made his transition to Canada an easier one by drawing on his vast cross-cultural experiences and applying the principles of ethics and relationship building that hold any business – no matter its location – together.

"I was born in a small village in Tanzania, East Africa located on Lake Victoria, the source of the River Nile and on the border of the world famous Serengeti National Park. After completing my primary education in this small village, I moved on to complete high school in Moshi Tanzania, on the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro," he explains. "My post-secondary education was in agriculture, specializing in Range Management at Egerton College in Kenya. Upon graduating in 1969, I returned back to Tanzania to work for the government. My first assignment was at a Dairy Farm Research Centre in Tanga, Tanzania on the coast of Indian Ocean. That is where I met my wife Rosy. We got married in November 1970. In November 1971, we immigrated to Canada. After spending a short time in Edmonton, we moved to Calgary."

Sunderji says the big move turned out to be a bit of a shock.

"Canada was a very different country from Tanzania. Not only did we have to adjust to the weather, but we also had to learn to do business and the daily routine differently," he ▶



Faizel and Karina Sunderji (left), Dynasty's current leadership team is seen here with Rosy and Jim Sunderji on the production floor at the company's Calgary plant.

recalls. "We were very fortunate that in East Africa, English was the median of education and we were very fluent in both written and spoken English. My first job in Canada was with an insurance company as a salesman, which involved a fair bit of traveling. In 1972, we were expecting our first child and I did not want to be on the road.

"So I took up a job working at Canadian Pacific Railway in Calgary and also got admission at SAIT in a three-year program in electrical engineering," he continues. "I worked and went to college, both full time, and after graduating from SAIT I worked for an electrical engineering company for a short period. In the meantime my parents and my siblings also migrated to Canada."

## THE AGHA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Having lived, worked and studied in several vastly different countries, Jim Sunderji's foray into international development and early childhood development should come as no surprise.

Sunderji works with the Agha Khan Development Network (AKDN) because he's particularly concerned children in developing countries are the most adversely affected by warfare and poverty. He's become passionate about providing them with the tools necessary to develop into healthier, more educated adults.

"The AKDN is a charitable organization and works with the underprivileged communities in third-world countries to improve the quality of life by providing basic needs like education, health, housing, humanitarian services, rural development and much more," he explains.

"As we all know, the critical period of human development is in early childhood development (ECD). Underdeveloped countries are lagging behind hugely in providing for this need," he continues, adding, "There is a great need in terms of quality infrastructure, qualified and trained teachers, health and hygiene and community awareness. My wife and

## 3D PRINTING

Jim Sunderji, chairman of upholstery specialty Dynasty Furniture and this year's Lifetime Achievement Award honouree, believes 3D printing – a technology that has already found itself in the apparel business – could soon make its way into furniture manufacturing.

This is a relatively new design tool. For those who haven't been exposed, it's the process of making a three-dimensional object using instructions from a digital file. 3D printed furniture might look more modern, but as tastes become less conventional, upholstery companies might indeed produce a few funky and innovative pieces to satisfy the more daring shopper.

To learn more about 3D printing and see a few examples, visit the following web sites:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdRswasftfl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdRswasftfl)

[www.wired.com/2014/12/dress-made-3-d-printed-plastic-flows-like-fabric/](http://www.wired.com/2014/12/dress-made-3-d-printed-plastic-flows-like-fabric/)

[3dprinting.com/products/furniture/](http://3dprinting.com/products/furniture/)

I are working with Aga Khan Education Service, India, in the Rural Education Advancement Program (REAP), which is an ECD program in Gujarat. The project provides quality pre-primary education including health, hygiene, community awareness, Read for Children Program for parents, publishing story books/pictures books in vernacular language for parents to read to their children, nutritious refreshment and many more interventions."

Sunderji's grassroots support of charitable endeavors also occurs locally. Dynasty supports Children's Hospital Foundations, post-secondary institutions, sports teams and other organisations in both Calgary and the GTA.

"[Charitable] work is satisfying and it has a huge impact on me and my wife and family. It's satisfying to see young children do what they could not do otherwise."

## WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

While Sunderji has been able to step away from day-to-day operations, he remains heavily involved in the company, splitting his time between challenging but rewarding philanthropic endeavors and keenly watching emerging trends in the upholstery world.

"Dynasty will continue to serve the furniture industry and provide a competitive fashion forward product to the consumers," he says. "Dynasty has ample capacity and in the short term it should continually innovate systems and equipment to remain competitive. In the long term, we have to start thinking of how 3D printing will impact our industry."

Sunderji thinks 3D printing technology has the potential to make a huge splash in the industry and he's prepared to adapt to the emerging trend. ▶ *Continued on page 50*



JIM SUNDERJI

“In the last 36 years, I’ve seen a lot of changes. In manufacturing, things are changing. In terms of long-term change, 3D printing is gaining momentum and impacting our industry. A month ago, a fashion show had a 3D printing garment. I believe it will gain momentum and in the long run it will impact all industries,” he says.

“We will have to wait and see how and when this change will impact the furniture industry,” he continues. “In the short term, the Canadian industry is going to grow because there’s more of a need for Canadian furniture. There’s been a slowdown in Far East imports, so Canada will be there to pick up the slack. Canadians like to buy Canadian and there’s domestic demand for Canadian-made furniture.”

As for Dynasty’s succession plan, Sunderji is happy Faizel and Karina Sunderji taken the reigns.

“I don’t have any plans to retire completely, but I’ve taken fewer responsibilities while Faizel and Karina have taken on a lot more,” he says, adding, “Faizel and Karina are very capable and are actually doing all the work presently and allowing me to get involved in the social work with Rosy. I am not doing as much work as I used to. I am fit and healthy and am not a rush to retire completely and I do not have any plans. But I realise that sooner or later I will have to think of retirement.”

As for any post-retirement (even if it’s not that imminent) dreams, Sunderji is happy to leave the company in the capable hands of his son and daughter-in-law.

“I think I’ll let the next generation plan [for the future].” **HGO**

*A regular contributor to HGO Merchandiser, ASHLEY NEWPORT is a Toronto-based freelance journalist who writes primarily for trade and business publications. Her specialties include food, hospitality and emerging social/business trends.*

## IS IT WORTH IT?

For most people, their booths generated palpable interest and they were optimistic about the launch or continued success of their show-cased products.

“We’ve had really good reception and we’re getting an enthusiastic response to the product so we’re very happy,” says Archilume’s Khattak.

Pierre Cousineau, the president of muralunique, a Montreal company specialising in creating wallpaper murals with high-quality digital images, says it’s important to be patient in the aftermath of a show.

“It takes time [to generate interest] if you’re not an impulse buyer,” he says. “I have some designers we saw last year that gave us an order nine months after the show. It’s not something that happens just like that. Our product changes a room so much that it has to be planned. Our product is more for residential applications, but it works commercially as well.”

For limestone bathtub producers Victoria Albert, generating interest happened early in the show.

“Very much so,” Carter replies when asked. “There’s a great mixture here. We’ve had a lot of architects and designers. We’ve had a lot of dealers come to visit us, some over a drink last night and some at our booth. They know that new stuff will be here and it’s great that they can come and find us.

The show is a good mix in terms of size and scale,” he continues. “It’s not ginormous like some of the European shows that take four days to walk and really can be very tiring. But there’s a good amount of people and a good amount of attractions and I know it’s sold out or close to sold out, which is a really good sign. I think it’s well organized in terms of ticketing and there are a lot of hotels around, so it’s accessible. It is a pleasure to do business here.”

The 2016 edition of the Interior Design Show will be in the north building of Toronto’s Metro Convention Centre from January 21 to 24 **HGO**

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Archilume’s suspended luminaire lighting.