

Rochester Eccentric

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Chrysler executive drives to the top

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From his office on the top floor of Chrysler headquarters in Auburn Hills, Tom LaSorda has a great view of the surrounding countryside. After 27 years in the automobile industry, he also has a unique perspective of what goes into making a car.

On May 1, LaSorda, 50, of Rochester, became Chrysler Group's chief operating officer and a member of the DaimlerChrysler Board of Management. It's a long way from his childhood in Windsor, where he was one of nine children of a union leader in a Chrysler factory.

With the promotion, what had been an intentionally low-profile if highly successful career has suddenly catapulted into the spotlight, with a profile in the New York Times, his picture in Forbes magazine and frequent trips to Europe.

The new job doesn't leave much time for leisure, and LaSorda laughs out loud when asked about it. He says he has a heated pool, "But I haven't had time to use it." He does enjoy golf.

"He's a great golfer," said Lino Borraccio, a friend and owner of Lino's restaurant in Rochester Hills. "He hits the ball a long ways. My favorite thing that I always get on him is he can't putt."

Borraccio said LaSorda also is a wine connoisseur with his own cellar. But despite his rank as the No. 2 man at Chrysler, he remains a regular guy.

"You'd never know the position he has, he's such a nice guy," Borraccio said. "They're just absolutely wonderful people. They're very unpretentious. ... If I could be like him, that'd be great."

LaSorda's father and a grandfather worked for Chrysler in Windsor. LaSorda did, too, rejecting his father's offer to remortgage the family home to pay for college.

"When you grow up in a family like that, you kind of understand what it's like when your dad is laid off," he said. "I think it just creates a different focus for you. And then when you have brothers and sisters that work in factories - some are union officials as well - it kind of gives you a perspective of what's it like from their end when some management person make a decision that costs hundreds of jobs."

LaSorda earned dual bachelor's degrees in arts and commerce in 1977. The same year, he joined General Motors. He later earned a master's degree in business administration.

He and his wife, Doreen, also a Canadian, have been married for 27 years and have two daughters, ages 22 and 19. The family lived in Michigan from 1985-87, then in Germany from 1991-93. LaSorda spent 23 years with GM and also worked for a time for a Japanese automaker before joining Chrysler in 2000 as senior vice president, powertrain manufacturing.

The entrepreneurial spirit emerged early on, with paper routes and other undertakings, including one during the heyday of Detroit Tigers pitcher Mark "The Bird" Fidrych when he and a friend decided to get into the T-shirt business.

"We brought them over to Windsor and we were selling them," he said. "My dad asked, 'Do you have a license, because you're going to be in big trouble if you don't.' He said, 'I'd recommend you take those back to where you bought them.' So we took them back."

These days, his job involves overseeing the day-to-day operations of the Chrysler side of DaimlerChrysler.

"It's everything from quality to manufacturing to materials ... what brings a car to the marketplace ... once we decide what we want to build," he said.

The latest promotion, he said, is the product of a well-rounded career.

"I think everyone should be pretty proud of their history, regardless of what it is," he said. "The German background certainly helped. ... I still believe it's fundamentally how you deal with people, how you treat them and try to get them on your team."

LaSorda scoffs at the notion that having a North American positioned to once again lead Chrysler is something of a milestone.

"The shareholders don't care," he said. "The shareholders want the best-qualified person regardless of creed, color, sex or whatever. If they're the best to run the company, they should be the ones appointed for it."

"I don't ever believe that one should look at what their next job is anyway. You've got a job that you perform, people take care of you."

"If there's somebody more qualified to run the company better than me, I would welcome that person."