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Executive Vice President Matt Levine (left) and President and CEO Bob Levine in front of Hy's New Haven Office



All in the Family:

HY'S LIMOUSINE WORLDWIDE

By Liz Hunter

Not many companies can boast 60 years in the limousine industry. Those that can, well, clearly they've been doing something right. Hy's Limousine Worldwide is one of those companies. Family-owned and operated since its inception, Hy's can attribute its success to the contributions of three generations and isn't showing any signs of slowing down.

Hy's was founded in 1951 by Hyman "Hy" Levine in what might be called *kismet*. Hy worked as a delivery man for the *New Haven Register* and was asked by the newspaper's owners if he had any interest in purchasing their 1939 Packard limousine. The vehicle had been sitting on cement blocks since its tires had been donated to the war effort. Hy's original intention was to put the limousine back together and resell it, but instead he had several requests for its use on weekends. Thus was born Hy's Limousine.

Today, Hy's fleet consists of approximately 100 vehicles ranging from Cadillac and Lincoln sedans, to hearses, GM SUVs, vans, minicoaches, and a party bus. The business still calls New Haven, Conn., home but now easily fills the space allotted by a 15,000-square-foot facility including garage and offices, along with onsite maintenance and gas pumps. There is even a second office in New Britain, which is close to the state's capital, Hartford. It's a long way from the home office that Hy ran in the early days while raising his son Robert "Bob" Levine, the com-

pany's current president and CEO who joined his father after graduating college in 1973.

Bob Levine is well-versed in the history of Hy's—as he should be—but seems to genuinely like telling how the company came to be where it is today. Weddings and funerals were the company's mainstays of profit in the 50s and 60s. "We were coming out of a time when not everyone had an automobile and households only had one car between them," says Bob Levine. "That propagated the use of limousines for a fam-

"Hy's can attribute its success to the contributions of three generations and isn't showing any signs of slowing down."

ily's special events like weddings or funerals." The large Italian and Polish immigrant population in the area had no other way to get there and back, putting Hy's in a nice position to provide that transportation.

In the late 1950s, the construction of Interstate 95 opened up the availability for Hy's to travel to La Guardia Airport (the only New York City airport at the time). Until I-95, the Merritt Parkway was the only major road. "We really take it for granted today, but



Hy's Escalade Hearse at church in Greenwich, Conn.



Hyman and Bob Levine in 1980



Twins Eric and Matt Levine in 1984



Hyman Levine in front of Hy's Hearse, Superior Factory, Lima, Ohio 1979



Hy's van driving through downtown Hartford



The Pedestrian Bridge at Phoenix Life Insurance in Hartford



Hy's sedan in front of the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts in New York

none of this was here when my father first went into operation," says Levine. "This road opened up new reasons for new vehicles." Hy grew his fleet to 8 vehicles until his son joined the company full-time.

"When I came on, I knew we needed to grow, so I took an aggressive role in the funeral side of the business," says Levine. "We had little competition in that arena, so I visited funeral homes to look at their equipment with the intent of purchasing their vehicles and then having them rent from us for funerals." Beyond that, Levine also applied for an interstate license so Hy's could legally go to the airport to do business. By 1980, Levine's push for business more than tripled the fleet to 28 vehicles.

In 1982, Hy's moved into the building where it operates out of today just five minutes off of I-95. Sadly, Hy passed away just before this, leaving his son to continue the business. From 1982 until 2008 Levine continued to grow the company on his own. "Within that time I can't pat myself on the back to having done anything specifically ingenious, but we had the good fortune of business coming our way," Levine says.

In 2008, Levine's son Matt joined Hy's as its executive vice president. It was at this point that Hy's experienced another phase

of growth spurred by the fresh ideas of a new generation.

"When Matt joined the company he brought ideas that were exactly what we needed," Levine says. While it had always been Levine's hope that Matt would join the company, it wasn't exactly in Matt's plan. "I've been involved in the company my whole life just from growing up in it and I had attended

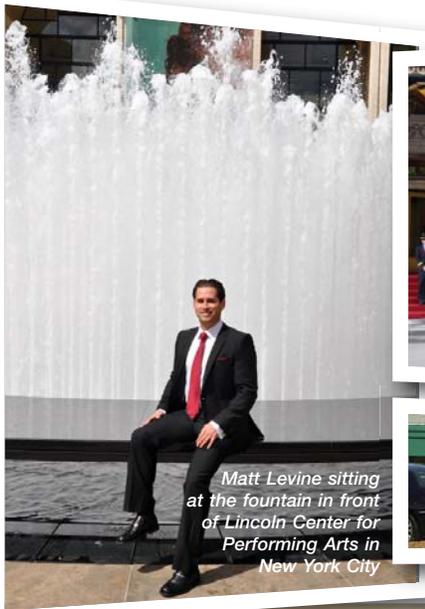
shows with my dad previously," says Matt Levine. "Joining the company was always an option, and I thought it would be nice to work with my dad and have the chance to expand our business."

After graduating from Syracuse University, Matt found employment with Wenner Media—the publisher of *Rolling Stone*—but just like most of the country, the economy halted the opportunity to advance. When he decided to work full-time for Hy's, he

wasn't quite sure where he would fit in. "Matt said from the beginning that he wanted to find his own niche here," says Levine. "And within a short time he was encouraging us to respond to some trends that I personally hadn't thought of as being important. He certainly proved me wrong there."

It was at Matt's suggestion that Hy's add SUVs and buses to its fleet. Prior to that, Hy's had nothing larger than vans, and now Matt says that the SUVs—including Denalis, Suburbans, and Escalades—were a great addition because they are rarely left sitting in the parking lot. They also were a perfectly timed investment for

role in Hy's expansion. Hy's relationship with Cadillac spans its 60-year history. "I was born and brought up with it, and at one time there was nothing else," says Levine. "On the funeral side, Cadillac is unquestionably the one of choice. It looks the best and the emblem and grill work sets it apart from anything else. We've really been spoiled on the funeral end." Levine cites very little maintenance on his GM products in general, saying besides preventive maintenance—which is done in Hy's facility—most of his Cadillacs never see a dealership between when



Matt Levine sitting at the fountain in front of Lincoln Center for Performing Arts in New York City



Hy's Escalade at the Plaza Hotel in New York City



Hy's chauffeurs Lou D'Amato (left) and Bob Heckler at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford



Hy's New Haven, Conn. office



Hy's Reservations Agent Dominic Tsodosis (left) and Office/Safety Coordinator Robert Glover



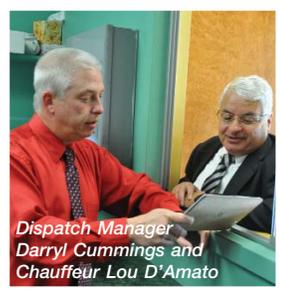
L to R: Jodi Page, Cyndi DeChiara, Diane D'Andrea, and Michelle Hollembaek



Dispatcher Ricardo Campbell



Detailers Joe Matteo (left) and Bill McFarlane detail vehicles



Dispatch Manager Darryl Cummings and Chauffeur Lou D'Amato



L to R: Matt Levine, Robert Glover, Kent Thomas, and Darryl Cummings

corporate clients who wanted discreet travel during the recession.

The whole of Hy's fleet is under 2 years old and is turned over in less than 3 years. Approximately 35 percent of the fleet—or 40 vehicles—is dedicated to the funeral market and all bear the Cadillac insignia. While the funeral end of Hy's accounts for about only 20 percent of the company's gross revenue, Levine is happy to report that it does provide work six days a week and a stable of cash flow. The company even has chauffeurs specifically for this market, comprised mostly of retired individuals looking to supplement their retirement income by working part-time.

Cadillac's dedication to the funeral market has played a huge

distinguished service in the Northeast for three generations. We certainly appreciate Hy's loyalty to Cadillac and hope to serve them with quality products for generations to come," says Ray Bush, Cadillac Professional Vehicle Program manager.

Over the years, Hy's has also developed a relationship with those also familiar with the Cadillac product, namely Rick Eichner of City Limousine Sales, who is one of the prime suppliers of vehicles for Hy's, including its Escalade ESV Hearse. Bob and Rick's business dealings grew into a friendship that Bob values to this day.

Corporate work is really the meat of Hy's revenue. The com-

they are bought and sold. "My return on investment is far and ahead of anything else," Levine says.

"Hy's Limousine has been a

Yale University
Law School
New Haven



Yale University
Woolsey Hall



Chauffeur
Dennis Martinez
in front of the Bridgeport
Bluefish Baseball Stadium

people we work with or I'm friendly with, and all of that is from going to trade shows and meeting new people." Levine

pany goes after volume corporate clients, those who will use two to four cars per day, going both ways, says Levine. Hy's has many clients who have been with the company for 20 years or more. Yale University and its medical center is the biggest player in the New Haven area. It's one of the largest employers in the state and one of the most coveted facilities to service, according to Levine. Hy's is one of the university's preferred transportation providers and does a good percentage of its work.

"There is not a lot of other industry in New Haven," says Levine. "Not many new companies come to our area, but we have the benefit of a second office in New Britain that can handle work near the capital."

Hy's bus in front of the MGM Grand Casino at Foxwoods Ledyard, Conn.



The company's proximity to the New York area airports is especially helpful when it comes to affiliate work. "We have vehicles traveling the routes between Connecticut and New York throughout the day so we have cars that can be available for immediate service, and we often get calls from affiliates if we have a car nearby and we're happy to accommodate them," says Levine.

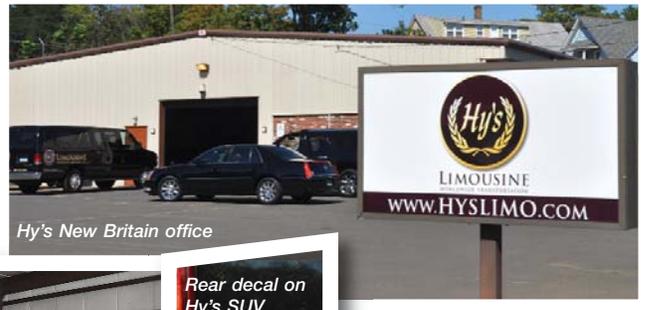
Affiliate work was another segment of business that Matt took charge of in 2008. "We hadn't really had an affiliate presence previously," says Matt. "We took some in, but we didn't send much out because the loss of control kind of worried Bob. But it didn't take long to see how the business was out there for us to capitalize on." Hy's affiliate network has expanded exponentially and Matt says building relationships has made all the difference. "I always recommend the

agrees that affiliate work is what has the most chance to grow at Hy's. "I am really impressed with how Matt has stepped up to handle this," he says.

In order to have better capabilities of building an affiliate network, Matt made technology a top priority, especially on the soft-

"Hy's affiliate network has expanded exponentially and Matt says building relationships has made all the difference."

ware end. "The software we used to have was basic, but it worked," says Matt. "But when we updated some hardware on the back end,



Hy's New Britain office



Hearses and other funeral vehicles are housed inside Hy's New Haven garage



it just wasn't compatible." That spurred the switch to Livery Coach almost 2 years ago. "It's a better system all around and we're really happy with it." GPS units were also installed in the fleet using eFleet, which integrates with Livery Coach. "Once you have GPS you wonder how you got by without it,"

says Matt. "We need to know where our vehicles are at all times and this shows us, as well as lets us see what routes chauffeurs are taking or if they are idling." Future technology that Hy's might be looking into is video recorders in vehicles and also backup generators in case of a power outage.

Matt is also responsible for the company's website, www.hyslimo.com. "We're in the process of updating our site not

only in the design but also with some organic SEO initiatives,” says Matt. When it comes to marketing and advertising, Hy’s favors anything with an online component. While the company still advertises in some local magazines and newspapers like the *Hartford Courant*, it’s more for presence than anything else. Matt says that Hy’s actually gets a good deal of feedback and business from a link that is on the Connecticut Wine Trail Association’s site. (The state’s wineries are almost like a hidden gem that most outsiders don’t know about.)

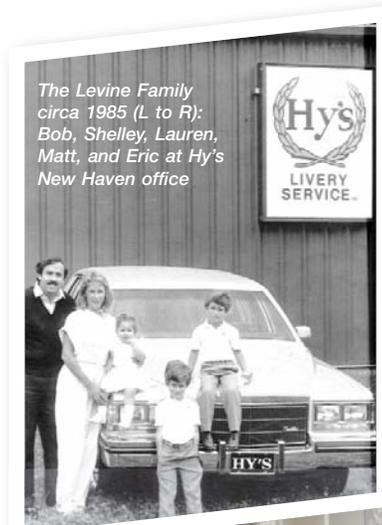
Hy’s has created a social media presence for itself on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, but Matt admits it is hard to keep up with. “It’s almost a full-time job in itself and you need to have someone dedicated to the updates,” he says.

with his clients. “Ninety-nine percent of clients will never see me or Matt,” he says. “We truly value customer service, and I have employees who will stop the car from going out dirty or will stay until the job gets done.” Hy’s engages customers regularly for feedback whether through a formal survey or casually collecting it via e-mail. “Client feedback helps you know where you need improvement,” says Matt. “

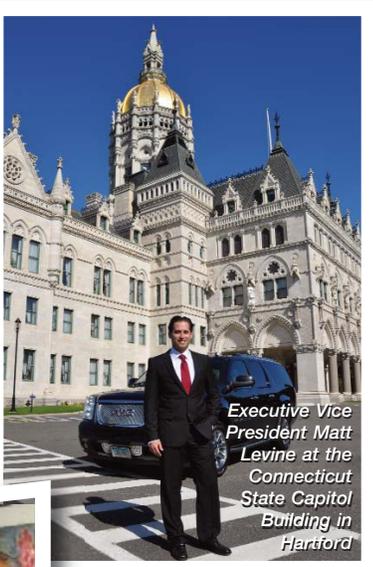
Levine however is the first to admit he is the “quintessential micro-manager.” He says, “I don’t delegate; I’m not good at it. I think it comes from being on my own all of those years with no one to really bounce ideas off of. You kind of become a slave to it.” He says it took him a long time to give up certain duties, but he forces himself to take his wife’s advice: “You’ve got to let them fail so you can correct them.”

Hy’s believes strongly in giving back. Its philanthropic efforts don’t go unnoticed. The company regularly donates vehicles or money to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and causes raising awareness for juvenile diabetes and breast cancer, of which Shelley is a survivor. The Levines also donate to organizations honoring their heritage like the local Jewish National Fund and Jewish Federation. The company is also active throughout the limousine industry and holds membership in the NLA, New England Livery Association, Meeting Planners International, and the local business travel association.

Running a family business is no easy task, but Levine couldn’t be prouder to see the success it has had in its 60 years. “Seeing Matt come in and succeed has been a positive thing for my wife and me,” Levine says. “I believe that business needs new blood and I think the community also appreciates the continuity in having another member of



The Levine Family circa 1985 (L to R): Bob, Shelley, Lauren, Matt, and Eric at Hy's New Haven office



Executive Vice President Matt Levine at the Connecticut State Capitol Building in Hartford



The Levine Family (L to R): Matt, Shelley, Eric, Alex, Lauren, and Bob

“Seeing Matt come in and succeed has been a positive thing for my wife and me. I believe that business needs new blood.” – Bob Levine

well with a small group of employees. There are five people in the reservations department, and Senior Customer Service Representative Michelle Hollembaek has been with the company the longest. “She is invaluable and has an excellent rapport with the clients,” says Levine. One or two people are staffed in dispatch each shift covering 24 hours, and three people are in the accounting department, including Levine’s wife Shelley. A former registered nurse at Yale University Hospital, Shelley joined the company in 2000. She handles the entire funeral end from administration to billing. “The funeral side is really her forte,” says Levine. “And besides that, she’s much more computer literate than me.”

Hy’s Head Mechanic is Ralph DeMaio and the car washers—who do it all by hand—are John Collins and Bill McFarlane. “We would be lost without them,” says Levine. The company’s chauffeur trainer is Eric Stewart-Alicea. He trains chauffeurs one-on-one, spending three days in the vehicle going over routes, locations, and airport procedures.

Levine recognizes his employees as the first line of contact

For as big as Hy’s is, the company runs

the family step in. I’m coming on 40 years in the business and I’d like to eventually retire. I still come into the office 7 days a week, so I am looking forward to taking that personal time in the future.” Levine just recently celebrated his 60th birthday and his family sent him on a trip to Pebble Beach. “It’s every golfer’s dream and I had a great time,” he says, adding that given the time, he’d play more often.

Matt—an avid traveler and sports fan—has built relationships with others in this industry who are stepping in as the next generation of leaders and says they all face the same challenges of working in a family business. “It can be hard to separate work from your personal life, but at the same time we have the opportunity to experiment with different things. That’s a freedom that we might not have had in other areas,” he says.

As Hy’s enters another year, Levine reflects on what his father Hy would say about the company today. “To be honest, my father was not a big ‘growth’ guy,” Levine says. “He would have been happy with just 25 vehicles. But I think, considering he was born in the Depression Era, he would have been amazed at what we’ve accomplished and also seeing his grandson involved would have thrilled him.” **LD**