

## BOASTING BUFFALO

# Generations of leadership

ROBERT STEVENSON IS FOURTH GENERATION AT EASTMAN MACHINE



JIM COURNEY

Robert Stevenson, president and CEO of Eastman Machine Co., is a history buff who met President Kennedy when his family took a tour of the White House.



Robert Stevenson's family has been running Eastman Machine Co. since the late 1800s, when his great-grandfather bought the company from an inventor

who had moved to Buffalo because it was an electrified city.

His great-grandfather, grandfather and father all made major contributions to the local business community, serving on boards and taking part in charitable efforts that focused on poverty, education and community health.

Stevenson, 66, is president and CEO and co-owns the company with his brother Wade, whose title is export president. In the last few decades, Eastman Machine took steps to solidify itself as one of the world's prominent companies in the design and production of cutting machines. A move into automated machines in the mid-1990s has consistently shown growth and now is a major part of a business with 125 employees at the downtown headquarters and factory.

His son, 41-year-old Trevor Stevenson, has served in every facet of the company and is poised to become the fifth-generation owner. But Robert still calls the shots, overseeing a company coming off a banner year and expecting \$40 million in revenue in 2018.



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**What's your personal and professional commitment to Western New York?** My grandfather and father were involved in many charities in the Buffalo area, and maybe you'd say it's in our DNA, but we've always wanted to stay in Buffalo and support the community. I have been chair of the Child and Family Services Foundation and the Medaille College board, and I've been a board member of the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County. My son (Trevor) has also been very involved. We have a foundation, the Eastman Foundation, and we try and support health initiatives in Buffalo. My business philosophy is that the three pillars of your business are your customers, your employees and the community in which you live. If you don't support the community, you're not going to have success in business. They're tied hand in hand and it's very important to us.

**How has the company survived changes in the industry?** In the mid-1990s I saw a trend that companies wanted to automate (as

opposed to Eastman's much smaller handheld machines, which remain an important part of the business). We went out and bought the technology for a two-dimensional, high-speed cutter, and that has been very successful for us, growing 10 to 15 percent every year. The other thing that happened in the mid-'90s is that we saw the only way we could maintain our market share in China was to open a factory there. It was a decision that cost us about 60 union jobs but it was about 20 to 30 percent of our business, and it allowed us to maintain our employment here without losing the Chinese market share. I wish we could have all of our manufacturing in the U.S. but, given the situation, this has been a win for us.

**How is the business doing?** Overall we had one of our best years last year and we're very optimistic about 2018. We're seeing a tremendous amount of activity worldwide. We have diversified the markets we sell into, from recreational boating to advanced manufacturing and aerospace to fishing rods, golf shafts and tennis rackets. I like to tell people that every single day they wear, touch, sit on or travel in a product that has been touched by an Eastman machine. People from Buffalo don't really know about us but we're one of those companies that is pervasive throughout the world.

— Dan Miner