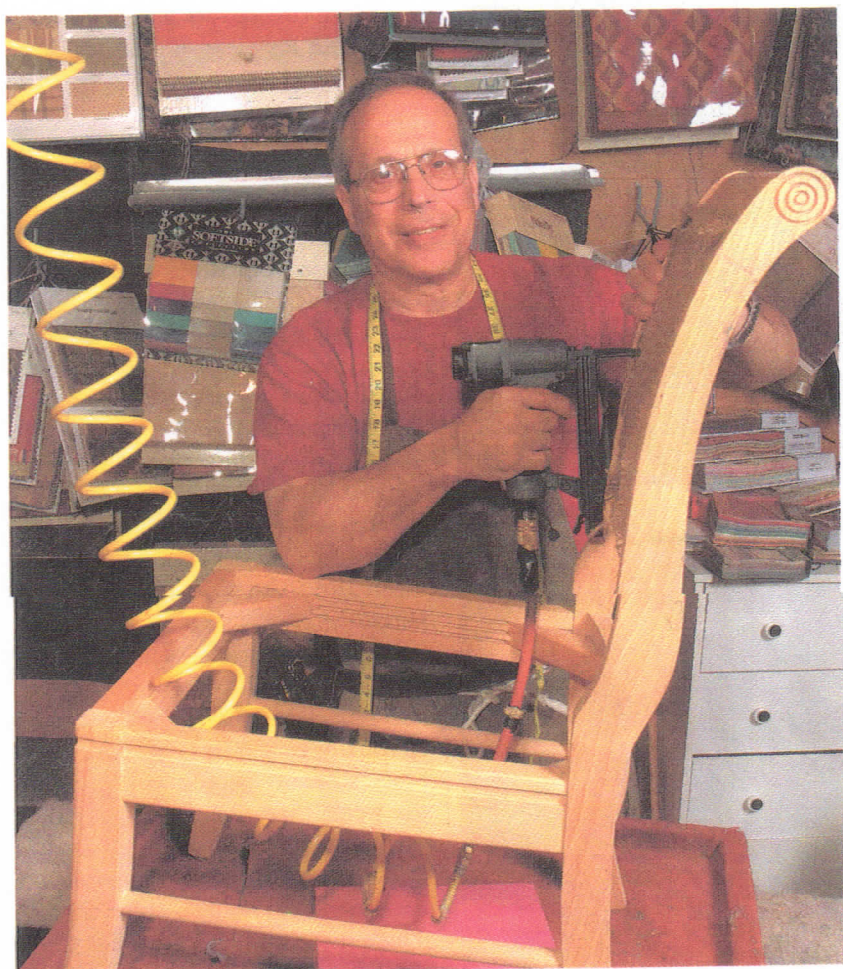


Upholsterer's Pride



Paul Wesley

As Vincent Ceneviva watched his friend's father-in-law work with fabric, he fell in love with the craft of upholstery and is proud to pass it on to his son

by Lew Larason

I've been interested in upholstery for a long time," began Vincent Ceneviva, "My friend's father-in-law did upholstery. I liked to watch him working with the fabric. I was fascinated." Vince grew up in Glenside, PA. Following in the footsteps of his father and one of his grandfathers, he started a four-year apprenticeship in Philadelphia to become a union carpenter and cabinetmaker. Deciding that he wanted to work for himself, Vince, in the early 1970s, studied to learn the upholstery trade. He liked it and has been at it ever since. His business name is Ceneviva's Custom Upholstery.

The Cenevivas moved from Philadelphia to their present Bucks County home about thirty-two years ago. Vince's workshop is a well-organized area consisting of about three hundred square feet, plus an office. In addition, he has a storage building close to his shop that provides another three hundred square feet. Along with giving him extra space, it also is where he does any woodworking required by his upholstery jobs.

Other than several hand tools, a few of which are very old but still quite useful, he has workbenches and upholstering horses. His main power tools are sewing machines, staple guns and air guns. Pointing out a staple gun, he said, "I use this tool the most. With these, it's much easier than it used to be to work at upholstery."

Along with numerous residential customers, Vince does upholstery for several commercial establishments. Many of these clients are offices and restaurants. "I can do upholstery for just about anyone," he said. "I also do a lot of jobs for gyms and health clubs. They keep me pretty busy." He showed some of the pieces he was working on for the LA Fitness, pointing out, "I often have to replace the lighter original frame material with plywood. It's much stronger. The seats and arms in wear harder on health club equipment. Along with LA Fitness, I also do jobs for other clubs like Gold's Gym, Better Bodies, Genesis Fitness Center and a few others." To illustrate the diversity of jobs he has done, he said, "I covered the seats in the coaches for the New Hope-Ivyland Railroad. That was a fun job! But, it certainly was a dirty one. Between dust and soot from the soft coal the locomotive burns, there was a lot of dirt."

When Vince receives a call from a private person, he tries to fit his visit into a timetable that suits the customer. "I usually visit homes on Saturdays. Since so many people work through the week, that often is the only time when I can see the furniture someone wants me to work on. Sometimes, a customer only wants a color change. That's not a problem. At other times, the frame is loose and the covering worn. That requires a total reworking."

Whether a sofa or chair only needs a color change or a complete restoration, he said the owners can find a fabric on a Website or at a store and bring it to him. Or, he can supply the material. He has a wide variety of samples to show clients. "What I do to a piece depends a lot upon how long the people had the furniture, how badly it's worn and how old it is. Some items really aren't worth the expense. However, if it's a family piece, that often is different."

After he visits the customer and

examines the furniture, it is decided whether or not he will do the job. If he's going to do it, it may be six to eight weeks before he picks up the item or items. He commented, "It usually takes only two to three weeks for me to finish a job like a sofa and a couple of chairs. Once I get the pieces in the shop, I like to get the job done so the items can be returned to the customer as quickly as possible." He added, "We take care of all of the pickups and deliveries."

Once a piece is in his workshop, if the frame is loose, Vince must remove all of the present covering, stripping the piece down to the bare wood frame. If there need to be repairs, he does that work first. Since he likes woodworking and has had enough training and experience, he is able to handle any wood repairing or fabricating. Many of the older frames need regluing. He does that as well, often using most of his numerous clamps. He pointed out, "I won't upholster a piece that has a loose frame. It must be tight or else I'm wasting my time with the upholstering." When he was asked what glue he used for the wood frames, he responded, "I use Titebond II. It's a good glue and is waterproof."

Once the frame has been examined and repaired or reglued as needed, he begins to rebuild the piece. Starting with the springs, he replaces the originals with the same type. "I don't use many zigzag springs. But, if that's what was there in the first place, that's what I replace them with," he said. Generally he uses coil springs. They are secured with an eight-way tie. After that he can begin rebuilding. He will first cover the springs with a 30-pound burlap. Next, he'll add decking material. (The decking is the flat surface under the cushions.) Usually, this fabric is cotton. Then, he covers that with the final material. "Although I'll make suggestions, I try to use what the client wants."

On most pieces Vince uses foam rubber for cushions. "If I have to glue this material, I use contact cement to secure it. That glue works best on foam." On some jobs he even uses hot glue. Each step of an upholstering job that he does may require a different adhesive. When he uses foam rubber in the

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cushions, he installs a zipper in the covers.

Vince has worked on nearly anything in a home that is upholstered. "I have covered antique wing back chairs and sofas, newer lounge chairs and club chairs, as well as contemporary chairs, daybeds, slip seats and even headboards," he said.

When restoring an upholstered piece of furniture, every step along the way is important. However, the one step that easily can be seen is the sewing of the final material. This requires the most attention. Vince explained, "When I'm sewing on a coarse fabric, if the line goes off a bit, I easily can correct it. By smoothing over the material, a needle hole won't show." He then added, "But, when I'm working with leather or a vinyl-coated material such as Naugahyde, which is what I use on the health club jobs, any wrong needle holes show. And, they can't be hidden." Vince feels the final covering and fitting take the most time in upholstering. "It takes far more time to cover a piece correctly than it does to strip off the old fabric and remove the tacks and staples."

Nearly all of the fabrics Vince uses are treated for stain resistance. "This is important, particularly in homes with children or animals and especially in those with both," he said.

Ceneviva's Custom Upholstery truly is a family business. Vince's wife Karen does the bookwork. This allows him to spend more time at his work. Also, their son Christopher has been involved in the business for the past four years. Vince noted, "He's learning the trade, and he's good at it."

Vince feels one reason their business is successful is because he thinks it's important to treat people like people. They have customers from a wide area, north to Allentown and the Lehigh County area, east to western New Jersey, south to the Philadelphia region and Chester County, plus a lot of local clients.

If you have an upholstered piece you want changed, restored or redone, call Vince at 215-822-8290. ♦

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