

# The Providence Journal

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## NEWS

# Textile turnaround

*Mike Rodrigues grew Swan Dyeing and Printing by focusing on small-order quality*

## **Lisa Vernon Sparks Special to The Journal**

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FALL RIVER, Mass. — Mike Rodrigues, who owns Swan Dyeing and Printing, remembers a time during his youth when sprawling textile mills dotted the New England landscape.

They provided employment for people like his parents and thousands living in Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts.

“My father drove me around Fall River to show me the size of the industry. There were plants everywhere,” said Rodrigues, 58, a Pawtucket native, who acquired Swan in 2004. “It’s hard to believe that it is all gone. And to think today I am the only guy left.”

Once there were 140 textile mills in the region, producing a majority of the country’s fabric. But in the last two decades, many have shut down, casualties of the shrinking textile and apparel industry that at one time boasted 20,000 manufacturing jobs in Fall River.

Today fewer than 20 percent of those factory jobs remain.

However, since acquiring Swan’s 200,000-square-foot facility on Stevens Street with 125 employees, Rodrigues said he has figured out a way to survive and grow.

His strategy for his core fabric printing business, which includes indoor/outdoor decorative home fabrics markets and sports licensed prints and other merchandise, has had great results. It called for cutting costs, trimming management, and revising the company’s business model for more efficient manufacturing and higher quality products.

Rodrigues hopes to help preserve the city's textile roots, provide jobs and keep people working.

“Fall River, it's a blue-collar town with no blue-collar jobs,” he said. “The American Dream is slipping away for a portion of the population — those who are not going to become a lawyer or a doctor — because of the new economy. What we are doing here is not supposed to be done anymore.”

During the early 1990s, the U.S. textile industry began collapsing with thousands of jobs disappearing after new federal trade policies took effect that favored off-shore manufacturing, said Kenneth Fiola Jr., executive director of the city's economic development office.

“It put the national textile business at a distinct disadvantage,” Fiola said. Those policies had a significant economic impact in gateway cities — historical cities of New Bedford, Fall River, Brockton, Lowell and Lawrence — that have a large segment of its workforce employed in manufacturing.”

The U.S. textile industry is one of the most robust sectors of the American economy. It is composed of yarn and fabric manufacturers, suppliers in natural and manmade fibers, dyers, printers, and finishers, as well as the machinery and textile chemical subsector and the U.S. apparel industry, according to data from the National Council of Textile Organizations. The industry is also a major supplier of products and goods for the U.S. military.

Historically it has provided jobs in non-urban areas and has served as a gateway toward upward mobility for many generations of workers. Despite the downturn of the 1990s and early 2000s, in recent years the textile industry has rebounded significantly, with the number of jobs on the rise. As of 2015, the industry employs 579,300 in total across all subsections.

At the time Rodrigues acquired the assets of Swan — then called Swan Finishing Co. — in 2004, few textile factories were still open in the Fall River area. Those that continued to operate shifted to military contracts.

Rodrigues has logged four decades in the textile and apparel business. He received a bachelor's degree in textile chemistry from Southeastern Massachusetts University (now University of Massachusetts Dartmouth) and later obtained an MBA degree from Providence College.

In 1999, Rodrigues went to work as Swan's vice president of manufacturing. But when an opportunity presented itself, he acquired the company's assets for \$1 million.

Rodrigues conceived a different strategy to revive the ailing business, which was still doing larger run production printing of 1,250,000 yards per week, with 10,000 to 50,000 yards per order. He reduced the manufacturing capacity to smaller amounts up to 500,000 yards per week, averaging 1,800 yards per order.

These shorter runs demand a more talented staff to be profitable, he said. By doing this, Rodrigues created a better quality product and was able to bring it to his customers, mainly home furnishing companies, quicker.

"Everyone said we are a declining market. I came in with a completely different business model. You can't have layers of management. Everyone has to add value," he said. "Our strength is in our ability to create new products to help the designers facilitate new ideas. And we know what we are doing. We are cost-effective and are right here in the U.S."

It's a model that has resulted in better sales. Since he acquired the company, sales have increased from \$8 million to \$30 million as of 2016, Rodrigues said.

In addition to the core business of fabric printing, Rodrigues has added a 100,000-square-foot adjacent warehouse. He has expanded the operation to manufacture throw pillows that are cut, sewn and finished at his plant.

He believes the secret to American manufacturing is to have an absolute specialty product that commands a good margin and develop it on a small scale to bring it to the market faster.

"My whole life is with this industry. I want to see it preserved," he said.