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NGC celebrates Tony Maraia's life

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Former NGC President Tony Maraia left an indelible mark on National Gypsum's history and on the lives of many associates. His family, friends, and associates lost a remarkable man August 14 to Parkinson's disease at age 84.

His 41-year career at National Gypsum started in 1958 when he was hired as a sales representative in the New Haven, Connecticut, Sales Office. At the time, the company also had a plant in the city. In a 2010 interview, Maraia recalled those first years: "At that time, we had to wear a suit, matching trousers and a jacket," he said, "and we had to wear a soft hat. It was a very structured environment."



During the interview, Maraia said two men helped shape his career – Fred Griffin, the sales manager in New Haven, and Dick Tarbell, the plant manager.



Autino O. (Tony) Maraia

First lath order sold

"Fred was traveling with me when I sold my first truckload of lath to State Lathing Company. Jim Frouge owned the company. He was intimidating, never smiled. My goal was to sell him our lath. In preparation for his new shipment, Jim bought a little fork lift with hard tires. Jim was out in front of his store with the fork lift when the truck arrived. Fred and I had driven over to meet the shipment when I noticed the truck had been loaded to unload by hand, not with a fork lift. I wanted to drive away. Fred told me to never run away from a problem and to go and buy two pairs of gloves. When I got back, we put on the gloves and helped unload the truck."

Maraia never stopped pitching in to help customers during his 41 year career, spent mostly in Sales & Marketing. He also recognized the important role the plants had in keeping customers satisfied but, perhaps most significantly, recognized and appreciated the people whom he believed made National Gypsum a great company.



Tony Maraia, Tom Nelson and C. D. Spangler

Several current and former NGC associates have commented on Maraia's life and leadership.

"Tony was action oriented," said CEO Tom Nelson. "He loved people. He loved the company, and he especially loved our customers. Tony is the person behind the Values we wrote over 25 years ago. He not only helped initiate them, he lived them. Everyone who knew him has a 'Tony story.' He will be greatly missed."

While Nelson was vice chairman of the company, he and Maraia traveled to meet customers and plant associates. Rotan Shipping Manager Sandy Nettleton recalls one of those visits:

New fork trucks for Rotan

"When Jeff McChesney (now regional manager) was plant manager at Rotan, the staff was invited to get together with Tony Maraia and a young fellow named Tom Nelson. I had never met either one of them, and they put me at ease immediately. Mr. Maraia asked me, in front of Jeff, if I could have anything I wanted what would it be? WOW! I told him I wanted new fork trucks – we got them soon after that. Later in a meeting in Charlotte, he asked me about rattlesnake hunting, something, unfortunately, I know about. He just had a way of putting people at ease."

Maraia had great admiration for former NGC CEO Peter Browning, who led the company during the dark days of bankruptcy. In fact, he called Browning “the savior of this company,” during the 2010 interview. Browning had mutual respect for Maraia, as he recounts:

“Tony was a unique combination of humility, compassion, and energy which touched all of us. He had an extraordinary commitment to always do the right thing for National Gypsum and all those around him. He always found time to remember friends and associates’ birthdays or special occasions with a phone call or note. Tony was my partner during my time at National Gypsum. Whatever I might have accomplished while there would not have been possible without Tony’s help, support, and coaching.”

“I will remember Tony Maraia as a visionary,” said Bonnie Austin. “He was always searching for new practices or technologies. Tony often thought ‘out of the box’ and had tremendous energy and a great work ethic. Those of us who knew him will remember his ‘bring-up’ system. (Anything he might want an update on later had a B/U on the corner of a page with a date. The pages were kept in a folder and “brought up” at the appropriate date. He would often write a note or make a phone on the date to commemorate a birthday or ask about a problem the person was having.) I learned a lot from him about being accountable and staying on top of things. He was one of a kind and will be greatly missed.”



Tony Maraia and Peter Browning

Saving joint compound

Vice President of Manufacturing John Corsi remembers Maraia as a friend, strategic thinker, and perhaps the savior of Interior Finishing Products:

“When I first joined the company, there was some discussion about NGC getting out of the joint compound business. My first task as director of strategic planning was to work with a team to complete a strategic review of the business and recommend a path forward. Page Odom, Joanne Eggert, Joe Ciampaglio, Chuck Gerber, Jim Allen, and Guy Arcure were on the team. Tony pulled me aside at the outset and said – ‘You need to find a way for us to keep and grow this business!’ I recall he said it with clarity and force! (With amusement, I thought to myself – ‘It always helps to know the answer before you start working on a problem.’)”

Corsi also remembers Maraia’s passion for the company Values: “I recall Tony walking around quizzing everyone about our Values – ‘What’s our third company value?’ he would ask as he walked into my office. I remember memorizing the Styrofoam cups he had printed with our Values. The Values began with CHCTW (customers, honesty, communication, teamwork, work hard and have fun). He drilled those into my mind!

“Lastly, I recall Tony reacting negatively to anyone saying ‘I’m in Corporate.’ He said in no uncertain terms, ‘We don’t have a corporate at this company. We may have folks that work in the field, in plants, or in an office, but we’re all part of a company. No one in the office in Charlotte is any better or worse than anyone in one of our plant or in the field. We’re all in this together to serve our customers!’”



Inspirational leader

Maraia had high expectations of himself and the people around him and held them accountable as retirees Bill Maloney, Gerrie Thomson, and Donnie Woloszynek remember:

“I remember when we were playing a round of golf with an important customer,” said Maloney. “Tony received a phone call from another customer. He never put down his cell phone, continuing his conversation and playing the last two holes one-handed. It was a good day because we wrote two orders and lost one golf match. He was dedicated to getting the job done. “He was a very tough-minded leader who never backed away from a difficult decision, if he felt it

could be in the best interest of the company. He told one of our largest customers that we didn't want as much business as they were giving us. It just wasn't profitable enough," Maloney said. "You could have heard a pin drop when the customer was told our position. Yet, we survived with doing less business with this valuable account.

"While it was sometimes difficult to understand why he was so hard on his people, he inspired them to be better performers, often exceeding their own expectations. You know where you stood, and he was there to help you. When you knew him, the tough exterior faded as he respected you for a job well done."

Showed appreciation

"While I was office manager in Syracuse, NY, and handling all Canadian orders, I was asked to fly to Charlotte," Thomson said. "They wanted to me to be the Canadian coordinator and move to Charlotte. However, Tony cornered me and said, I need you to take over the New Haven Sales Office and turn things around. I knew not to say no to Tony, and I went to New Haven and worked nights and weekends. Tony was very appreciative, and I was moved to other offices. When I retired, I started going to the Trailblazers Spring Flings every year, and Tony was there. I would get a big hug, and it didn't matter who Tony was talking to he would tell them how I moved all over the country for the company. Tony was my inspiration and my friend. I am so glad to have known him."



Donnie Woloszynek

Tough boss, with soft side

Woloszynek said: "Tony left an impression on me and countless others. He was a man who demanded focus and hard work, but the soft, caring side of Tony was ever present and was there until the very end. I first met Tony when I went to the New Haven Plant to install new computer software. Tony was district sales manager in an office inside the plant and met me first thing that morning. Years later, I had the privilege of working for Tony in the Sales Department. He was one of the toughest bosses I ever had and demanded full attention to your duties, but the softer side of Tony would take you to lunch or simply say 'thank you' or 'nice job, Woz!.' He loved his job and loved the people who reported to him as well as all the people in the NGC organization."

"As a new associate, I remember the first time I saw Tony in the lobby at Charlotte. I was headed for coffee in the old canteen. After saying good morning he welcomed me to the National Gypsum family. I was surprised he even knew who I was," said Tracy Orphanoudakis, plant administrative manager at Savannah.

Pontoon boats, jet skis, 'flavored' coffee

While Maraia served as senior vice president of Sales and Marketing, the company made the decision to close its sales offices and open the Customer Service Center in Charlotte. He was instrumental in the planning and worked hard to create a Customer Service Center team. Many of the Center associates remember his pontoon boat, jet skis, and "special" coffee including Gay Lyles and Val McRorie.

"When the Customer Service Center consolidated, I moved to Headquarters as a customer service representative from our Long Beach, CA, office," said Sales Representative Steve Noland. Tony came over to my cubicle and asked to sit with me so I could teach him all I knew! He hung out for a short visit and was on his way. I never forgot that, and I also remember his taking us out on his boat to show his appreciation for us. He was a good man, and my prayers go out to his family."

"Every summer, Tony would take any of the customer service representatives who wanted to attend out on his pontoon boat," said Retiree Twilla Jessop. "He would split the group in thirds and take three separate trips on Lake Wylie. He stocked the large cooler with adult beverages, and we would be off to cruise the lake and do a little jet skiing. Then, we went to a restaurant on the lake, and he bought dinner for us topped off with to-go cuts of coffee, leaving a little extra room in the cup. He provided his own toppings, Kahlua, vodka, etc., complete with whipped cream once we were on board the boat again. It was nice to enjoy a good time with co-workers. He truly cared about all of us and often stopped by to chat. This included the Western Area late shift where we used to work until 8 p.m. It was not uncommon to see him at that hour."



Gay Lyles and Tony Maraia, Lake Wylie, 1996

Janet Hindman remembers going on the boat trips, too. She was an administrative assistant at the time: “One year Tony took all the administrative assistants to vice presidents along with the other ladies in the office for a boat ride on Lake Wylie. The looks that he got from other people on the lake were very funny. I know they were wondering how such a distinguished man had a boat full of women. We had a great laugh about it. Tony was a great person and will be greatly missed. I am glad I had the opportunity to get to know him.”



Renée Cieslikowski

Assistants have fond memories, too

Three women currently working at National Gypsum were Maraia’s administrative assistants and knew and respected him greatly:

Renée Cieslikowski, senior advertising manager, worked for Maraia for several years and was able to talk to him on Saturday before his death. She last saw him in April while she was in Florida visiting her mother: “Tony was a great leader. He was tough and expected 120 percent from those who worked for him, but he was fair. He treated everyone with the upmost respect.

“When the company moved to Charlotte, my husband and I were the youngest couple to move. Tony and his wife, Jane, took us under their wings. He loved his large Italian family of nine brothers and sisters. He loved watching other people have a good time. Those boat rides on the lake and taking people to dinner was fun for him. He will be greatly missed.”

Cieslikowski has a file of Maraia’s poetry. He wrote under the pseudonym, Shortfellow. On the following page is one he penned about the Gold Bond Team.

Customer Account Specialist Debbie Burluson worked for Maraia over 14 years. “Tony was responsible for the implementation of the Customer Service Center. When everyone said it ‘wouldn’t work,’ including our customers, he was more determined than ever to prove that it ‘would/could work.’ He was always open and receptive to new and/or better ways to do things and what would be most economical for the company.

“One of the things he had on his desk was a plaque with this on it: $2 + 2 = 4$, $2 + 3 = 5$, $2 + 4 = 8$. It was a reminder that everyone is quick to point out the one thing that is wrong, rather than point out the two things that are right. He recognized the good, right things people did and never dwelled on the wrong.

“We shared many good years together not only as a boss/employee, but also as a personal friend to me and my entire family.”

“For those fortunate enough to have worked with Tony Maraia, bask in your memories of his kind, encouraging, and generous spirit, said Janice Elder, assistant to Tom Nelson. “No one was a greater cheerleader for National Gypsum, and his legacy will live in the many positive changes he championed. He strived every day to live fully, to make each day count, and to do his absolute best to ensure that our company would endure. Though the world has lost someone very special, Tony will always remain alive in the memories of those who respected him. Rest in peace, my friend and hero!”



Debbie Burluson



Janice Elder



Tony Maraia, fourth from left, on a trip to Ft. Dodge with other associates, Dave Walsh, Vince Guercio, Dennis Merriam (now VP of HR), Peter Browning (then CEO), Cindy Hartley, Jerry Carroll, and John Wade.

The Gold Bond Team

By Shortfellow

You've heard the story – all of it
that we have tried to tell

You've laid your plans extensively
to do the job and sell

Distributors across this land
will hear the message told

As you converge upon the scene
confident and bold.

To tell them and their dealers
like only You can do

About our panels "Profit Punch"
unique and oh so new.

You'll hang displays – hold seminars
take orders by the truck

Hold meetings with the countermen
leave nothing just to luck.

You'll do it like you always have
like those who've gone before

Because you're not just salesmen
indeed you're much, much more.

You're professionals – unequaled
by no one in our trade

You've accepted every challenge
you've never had it made.

And once more time will prove again
there's nothing you can't do

Once you've set your mind to it
cause that's the likes of you.

So get up and leave this meeting
proud that you're the cream

Of men and women who make up
the famous Gold Bond Team!