

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## A vision of Southwest Florida's building industry

BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
ewilliams@florida-weekly.com

Lee Building Industry Association Executive Vice President Michael Reitmann has been representing company presidents, foremen, attorneys, mortgage brokers, plumbers, and electricians for 22 years in Southwest Florida. To him, these builders are the lone rangers of capitalism and free-enterprise at its best, where big risks are taken and hard work makes dreams a reality.

"They're the last entrepreneurs," he said. "They're the last cowboys left. That's why the building industry personifies for me what the true American Dream is all about."

Lee BIA memberships in Lee, Hendry and Glade counties include over 1,000 companies, totaling close to 50,000 employees. All have a source of knowledge, power and a unified voice in the BIA. Through it, they are also connected to national organizations, like the National Apprentice Training Program that Reitmann lead for 10 years in Washington, D.C.

But in the 1970s, Reitmann perceived the American Dream differently, he said. As a young professor at Jacksonville University, Reitmann favored a more liberal vision. He never imagined leaving an academic world rife with ideology and ideas, he said, but short on the reality of making a living. In the 1970s, the demand for the German language and literature courses he taught dropped. Reitmann lost his tenure at the school and went to the classifieds for work.

"My whole preparation was in the liberal arts, and then I end up with a career in the building industry association," he said. "I believe it's the best thing that's happened to me."

In the wake of recreating himself, Reitmann's liberal, ideological youth morphed

into something more conservative.

"I love idealistic students, but the naïveté..." he said. "They have a rude awakening when they graduate and have to go and work for a living."

Reitmann, 66, has a 21-year-old daughter enrolled at Edison College. He feels the country's education system doesn't always prepare students for what comes next. And he believes government assistance programs such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "The New Deal" encourage a lack of personal initiative.

"When something is given to you for nothing, you don't appreciate it," he said. "We've created a whole culture dependant on government handouts."

So where does government play a part? For one, he said, in the area of mental health. For 10 years, Reitmann has served on the board of Lee Mental Health services, which is in dire need of funding. Most of Lee County's mentally ill currently end up in jail or on the streets.

"The state has really shirked its responsibility and the federal government is no help," he said. "There is a segment of society that cannot be helped by anybody that I think we as a society have a responsibility to help."

But the able should help themselves, he said. To him, builders represent the American free spirit and their culture is a symbol of the American West: a place where people make it on their own and personal visions bloom. And in his position with the BIA, he lobbies for a more hands-off approach to construction. For example, the shapes and colors of buildings should be less restricted, provided they aren't offensive or environmentally insensitive.

"The excitement of an area is allowing a freedom of expression," he said.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS  
Michael Reitmann

In the nation's capital, where Reitmann lived for 10 years, he witnessed that melting pot of expression on an international level.

"You can go up Connecticut Avenue and all the embassies are there," he said.

Reitmann, part of the melting pot, emigrated from Transylvania, Romania. He remembers passing through Ellis Island at age 10 and taking an exam to become a U.S. citizen at 15.

"It was a very proud moment when I became a naturalized citizen," he said. "...I've been very privileged."

Along the way, writers like the darkly comic Franz Kafka and "American Transcen-

dentalist," Nathaniel Hawthorn, captured his imagination. Later, it was the rapid growth in Florida that caught his attention. As for the recent housing market bust, Reitmann said that is only a natural settling of overinflated prices, and a return to a healthy market is imminent.

"(Southwest Florida) is just now at the potential for really expanding from a limited base of construction, tourism and agriculture," he said.

Now, with homes reaching their lowest prices, it's a buyers market, particularly for Europeans. A house in Cape Coral selling for \$150,000 is worth about 105,000 Euros.

In the next decade, Reitmann predicts a number of things: research industries and high-tech companies will move to the area. Downtown Fort Myers will continue to be in the process of rebirth, as usual.

"To me, that is a mecca," he said. "The redevelopment of downtown will reduce urban sprawl!"

More and more, natural beauty will be incorporated into construction of shopping centers and homes, creating environmentally friendly construction. Everyone, and in particular tourists, will appreciate this, he said.

A more populated downtown will create a "center," allowing for a better public transportation system. And somewhere on the horizon, Reitmann envisions high-speed rails whisking passengers through various corridors from Orlando to Naples, from Miami to Tampa to Fort Myers to Daytona Beach.

There's still something that sounds dreamy, maybe even naïve, about the idea of super-fast trains racing across Southwest Florida. Reitmann doesn't seem naïve though, just imaginative, suggesting that a liberal professor and building industry realist aren't such different people after all. ■



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