



Allen E. Gant, Jr.

DISTINGUISHED CITIZENSHIP AWARD

By D G McCullou Many North Carolinians know of Allen E. Gant, Jr., an innovator and recently retired CEO of Glen Raven, Inc., a global provider of performance fabrics with 40 locations across 17 countries and six continents. They might also know Glen Raven, headquartered in the Triad where 550 of its more than 3,000 associates work, for its recent acquisition of Sunbury Textile Mills, the Pennsylvania-based leading manufacturer of decorative jacquard fabrics.

But few know of the rich family history behind Glen Raven, which was founded in Burlington in 1880 as a family-owned apparel business. Or that until Leib Oehmig became CEO of Glen Raven in 2017, only family members served in that role, including Gant, his grandfather, father, uncle and two cousins.

Through that long family legacy, and largely under Allen Gant's leadership, Glen Raven has transformed its business and culture. In the 1950s, the company

introduced the world's first commercial lady's pantyhose. Later, in 1961, Glen Raven revolutionized the awning industry with Sunbrella fabric—now seen in marine, shade and furniture markets. Today, with 43 global brands, less than 1 percent of its business comes from apparel, compared to 90 percent in 2000.

Gant, who helped oversee two big restructures and several acquisitions and mergers, reflects that reinventing a company becomes extremely challenging. "You care so much for your people. But the results are always fantastic, if you do it right. Glen Raven's culture embraces innovation and transformational change, and this type of culture requires people with the vision to drive a company forward."

Gant learned the family business by watching his heroes—his father, Allen E. Gant, Sr., and uncle, Roger Gant, Sr.—at work. His two cousins, Roger Gant, Jr. and Edmund Gant, both served as CEO and taught him well, too.



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As Gant grew up, Burlington resembled a tiny railroad center town with a few company shops around Main Street. Gant recalls only four phone numbers existed, and the Gant family home (his grandfather's home) became the fourth after the town hall, police, and fire department.

As a boy, Gant remembers feeling “thoroughly involved” with the business, which then focused on apparel and industrial products. Customers and suppliers from New York and abroad came to their home and Gant's dad picked them up from the railroad stop. “I was thrown into customer interactions from the early stages. I remember sitting on our customers' laps.”

While the law prevented him from working formally for the company until age 16, Gant did odd jobs from 13 onwards, including carrying out the trash and, to his mother's chagrin, shoveling out the cinders from the cooled coal fire burners. “I came out covered with soot and my mother was very upset with my father. But that was part of the deal. It was a different time.”

The huge, close-knit family provided additional learning and support. His father lived next door to his brother, Roger; aunts and uncles lived within a block. Each Sunday, families took turns hosting a giant lunch where the women and men—all impeccable, competitive cooks—tried outdoing one another with batter cakes made with chicken hash, wild game, turkeys, chickens and roast beefs. “The women never shared their recipes,” Gant recalls. “After lunch, the ladies retreated to the parlor and the gentlemen to rocking chairs on outdoor porches. Here they'd discuss the business for the week. I could listen, if I were quiet, and learned from the practical joking and talk.”

In 1971, Gant formally became a Glen Raven employee—starting with labor-intensive jobs that taught him how the machinery operated and how people got along. Increasingly responsible roles then groomed him to become CEO. Today, he feels immensely proud of Glen Raven, its people and its ability to remain nimble. “Our company culture brings innovation to our employees,” he says. “Every employee has the ability to shut down a machine if they detect an unsafe situation, for instance. This approach ensures five to ten-year long records free of accidents or injuries. Employees work on flex schedules because I never saw the need in keeping track. I understood: people are creative at all times of the day, and sometimes our best creative thinking happens away from work.”

Gant, who remains chairman of Glen Raven Inc.'s board of directors, says the newly acquired Sunbury Textile Mills illustrates the innovative culture of Glen Raven. “To me, innovation remains the last frontier. And America remains unique for innovating within a free environment for nearly 300 years. Here, we have the freedom to fail and the freedom to succeed—and that's the only place where you get that innovation.”