

Former Armstrong Flooring scientist opens consulting firm

By Ioannis Pashakis

Wood product scientist Brian Beakler felt that he needed a new challenge after a 16-year career at Armstrong World Industries Inc. and Armstrong Flooring Inc., which spun out of Armstrong World in 2016.

When Armstrong Flooring sold its hardwood flooring business this year, he saw his chance.

Beakler, the company's senior manager of business support and research and development, left Armstrong and started his own consulting company, Beakler Consulting Services, which is based in York Township, York County.

"This was something I thought about for several years," said Beakler, a wood product scientist with a doctorate in forest resources production and management from Penn State University. "I was the type of person that had a good position with the company and worked awfully hard to get to that level, but there was something always telling me to challenge myself in a different way."

Beakler's firm consults with flooring companies on market trends, product manufacturing and design, and research and development.

Beakler joined Armstrong World Industries in 2006 after working for three years as a wood scientist at Matthews International's casket division in Manchester Township, York County. After holding numerous jobs in Armstrong World Industries for 13 years, he moved to the new Armstrong Flooring when the ceiling and flooring parted ways in 2016.

For most of his time with Armstrong, Beakler worked on wood-flooring development projects. In 2012, he led a team in implementing a proprietary method for hand-scraping hardwood



Brian Beakler, a wood product scientist with 16 years of experience at Armstrong World Industries Inc. and Armstrong Flooring Inc., split off to create his own consulting company in March. PHOTO/SUBMITTED

floors that led to the company's American Scrape line of hardwood floors. Since then the American Scrape line has gone on to generate \$800 million in sales, according to Beakler.

Beakler left Armstrong, though, after the Manor-Township-based company sold its flooring business to American Industrial Partners, a private equity firm in New York. The deal was completed at the start of 2019. Beakler left in March.

Beakler Consulting provided an immediate full-time job for its founder thanks to his connections in the industry. Many firms he had worked with at Armstrong were interested in hiring the new company as a consultant, according to Beakler.

He soon realized he had found a niche in the wood-products industry that was not being filled.

"There are people that understand the industry but most of them are employees of big, major companies," he said. "But they are

not offering their knowledge."

The firm has made inroads, in particular, with smaller companies that can't always afford a specialist with Beakler's pedigree full time, according to Barry Brubaker, owner of Nydree Flooring LLC in Bedford County, Virginia, which is the central part of the state.

Nydree makes hardwood flooring that is infused with acrylic resin in a patented process that the company says results in stronger wood. The company sells its products throughout the U.S., as well as in Nova Scotia and Ontario, Canada.

Nydree Flooring hired Beakler's to figure out how it can reduce its manufacturing costs. The wood flooring industry has been historically reluctant to change, according to Brubaker, who said that his company's relationship with Beakler has already helped Nydree improve its efficiencies.

"Most companies can't afford to hire someone like Brian in a full-time position," Brubaker said. "For a smaller company, a consulting arrangement for one or two months a year makes sense."

Beakler also has called on former colleagues to bring their expertise in other segments of the flooring industry, such as vinyl flooring.

"When I started really giving this a lot of thought I reached out to friends of mine in the industry and got the affirmation that I was doing the right thing," Beakler said. "With a big company like Armstrong you have the opportunity to work with a lot of peers in your industry. I was fortunate enough to build a network of peers and friends."

Beakler currently has seven specialists on his team, all of whom worked at Armstrong at some point in their careers. They include Lynn Wise, a process improvement and resilient flooring specialist who recently retired from Armstrong World after 38 years, and Tom

Erisman, a commercial flooring specialist with 46 years of service in Armstrong's new product development group.

Other partners are Wes Dunn, lumber drying and yard management specialist; Laura Gemperline, a design specialist; Sunil Ramachandra, a test development and design specialist; Jeffrey Norton, a mechanical engineer; and Mark Boldizar, an innovation and strategy specialist.

"If Brian doesn't have a certain skill then he has people on his team he can bring in," said Kip Howlett, president of the Decorative Hardwoods Association, based in Sterling, Virginia. "If you add up all of their years in the industry manufacturing products, developing products and taking those to market, they have a century of experience."

The Decorative Hardwoods Association represents the country's hardwood plywood, hardwood veneer and engineered hardwood flooring industries.

The association operates a testing laboratory that offers services like fire, emissions, environment and physical testing of the products made by its member companies. It hired Beakler Consulting to gain insight on the potential to add other testing and certification services.

Howlett said that he has worked with many consultants over the years but has never worked with veterans as seasoned as Beakler and the members of his team.

"Because of his academic background and professional experience, (Beakler) is truly a subject-matter expert in wood products and the process of bringing new products through development and testing to commercial launching," Howlett said. "Frankly, I don't know of anyone else in that niche."