

Universal Equipment

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa (AP) - Once he taught religion in a Catholic high school. Now he's trying to revive a business. For Steve Sadler, it's all the same.

"It's a resurrection job, I like to tell people," Sadler said. "I went from one resurrection job to another."

In his new job, he's trying to resurrect one of the biggest names in the fitness industry: Universal Gym Equipment.

Founded by Muscle Beach alum Harold Zinkin in 1957, Universal became synonymous with fitness equipment _ the way people say Jell-O for any type of gelatin _ because of its chrome-plated, multi-station weight machine that was snapped up by schools, health clubs and training centers around the world.

The company's annual sales peaked at \$54 million before it went into bankruptcy in 1996 after several ownership changes and production ceased. Though thousands of Universal machines were still in use, no new ones were being sold.

But the Universal name was too enticing to let die. Flexible Flyer, known for its sleds and wagons, bought the name and sold it to a group consisting of Sadler, his brothers Tom and John, and three other investors.

They also acquired \$1.5 million in inventory and moved the office and warehouse to Cedar Rapids, where Universal products were made from 1985-93.

"What drew me in was the name," said Sadler, 48, who had left a family business, Sadler Power Train, to go into teaching. "It was a strong, traditional name that was recognized.

"And I learned in the past year that you can't go anywhere in this town without meeting somebody that either worked at Universal or had a brother that worked at Universal or their dad worked at Universal. I've never heard anybody yet that didn't enjoy what they did there, and I think it really got down to the fact they really took pride in what they made."

The "new" Universal has seven employees at its headquarters, five of whom worked for the company previously. Three regional sales reps were added to the staff in June, all with backgrounds in physical therapy and strength training.

They're needed to generate new business because the Universal machines were so well made they don't break down, said Sadler, who is the company president.

"You see a lot of 20-year-old machines and all they need is cables," Sadler said as he walked through a 28,000-square foot warehouse filled with parts, weights and machines ready for shipping.

"Hopefully we're getting to the point where they need new ones. When a customer has to buy only once every 20 years, that keeps you looking."

Most of the equipment is produced at two other eastern Iowa companies, 4-L MFG Inc. of Lisbon and Mi-T-M of Peosta, and is trucked to Cedar Rapids for assembly. The weights are manufactured in Georgia and the chroming is done in Lincoln, Neb.

Manufacturing resumed in 1999 and the company has averaged about \$100,000 a month in sales. Sadler is hoping for \$2 million in sales this year, which he figures would be enough to turn a profit.

The company has reconnected with about 25 dealers so far, including Universal Fitness and Leisure in Columbus, Ohio.

"Being in the fitness business, Universal Gym was my start and their quality and their reputation was a good marriage with my philosophy," said Bob Kennedy, who owns the Columbus business. "So yes, I'm glad they're back.

"Universal was at the forefront of the fitness craze. It was a craze back then. It's a lifestyle today."

Zinkin, now 78 and living in Fresno, Calif., also is delighted to see his product back on the market. He first gained fame as one of the body builders who flexed and performed acrobatics in Santa Monica in the 1930s. Among the others were Jack LaLanne, the original TV exercise guru, and Joe Gold, founder of Gold's Gym.

The Universal machine came about because Zinkin was looking for a strength building device that wouldn't take up much room, could be operated safely by one person and would do away with the tedious task of adding or removing weights from a bar.

"I was very, very enthused about it," Zinkin said. "I knew it had the right to live. It was a matter of getting into the right hands. After we separated ourselves from Universal (in 1968), I think it became a financial entity that got passed around once too many times."

While Universal was in bankruptcy court, Zinkin said his son De Wayne talked of getting money together to buy it back. Zinkin nixed that idea.

"Part one involved such love and passion," he said. "Part two might not have felt that good."

While the multi-station machine will remain the backbone of Universal's operation for now, the company also produces single-station units designed for specific exercises. As he nodded his head toward a line of those machines, Sadler noted: "Our future is there. People are willing to devote more space to it now."

In the meantime, Sadler does what he can to learn about running a business with a wider market than Sadler Power Train. He has to start thinking nationally now, even globally. For years, Universal was a major supplier of equipment to foreign athletic teams and to U.S. military bases overseas.

"Coming from a regional business to what once was worldwide is making it a real challenge. Spending that \$5,000 to get that one-page ad in a national magazine, it still makes me croak to think about it," Sadler said with a laugh.

But he remains confident the business will thrive. His plan is to put in five years and then move on to something else. Kennedy, the Ohio dealer, shares that confidence.

"There is still that name recognition in the school athletic physical education programs," he said. "Any school can't go wrong with purchasing Universal because of their quality. Just based on their past history, I feel they'll be successful."