



Deal Broker

by audrey r. browka

photos: kevin lock

He's smart, ambitious and honest – not to mention a shrewd negotiator. But Joseph V. Siemienowski '76 says hard work, perseverance and his Canisius education helped him turn a lifetime of hardships into happiness.

Joseph V. Siemienowski '76 is not ashamed to say that much of his life was spent living "close to poverty level." The son of Polish immigrants, Siemienowski's parents, Joseph and Lucy, came to this country under dire circumstances. Both were victims of the Russian occupation in Poland during World War II.

Siemienowski's father, a captain in the Polish Army, was captured by Russian military forces and held prisoner in Kolyma, near the Bering Strait. He escaped when Polish General Wladyslaw Anders brokered a deal with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to have the imprisoned officers released, so that they could be part of a new Polish Army in the USSR. Upon his escape, the senior Siemienowski joined British military forces in Italy, where he fought in the famous Battle of Monte Cassino.

Lucy Siemienowski, along with her young children, Henry and Diane, and their grandmother, were seized when Russian soldiers stormed their house in Slonim. The family was taken by cattle train to Siberia and put to work in the Gulag potato fields, until one night, when Lucy Siemienowski planned their escape.

"For several months, my mother trekked across Russia to the Caspian Sea, to Iran (which was Persia then) and onto Uganda with Henry, Diane and my grandmother," states Siemienowski. "She never knew where they were going to stay or how she was going to feed them. Basically, she begged and borrowed to keep her family alive."

It wasn't until the War ended, five years later, that the Red Cross was able to reunite Joseph Siemienowski with his wife and family in Uganda. They moved to England but after five years of sheer famine, the Siemienowski's decided to start a new life in America. "The way my mother tells the story," says Siemienowski, "she literally just put her finger on the map and it landed in Buffalo."

The hope was that life would be easier in the new world. And for a while it was. Joseph and Lucy even had two more children, Anna and Joe. But the family's happiness turned to hardship when Joe was seven years old. His father died and then his mother became ill. Too sick to care for her children, Lucy had no choice but to place Anna and Joe in an orphanage. Six months later, they were all reunited but the hardship continued as the family struggled to live on a \$100 a month social security check. To help pay the bills, Joe's older brother, Henry, an engineer who lived out of state, sent a portion of his check home each week. Still, it was not enough to make ends meet. In order to survive, Siemienowski's mother converted the five bedrooms on the second floor of their Ellicott Street home into small apartments for rent.

"It was a way to provide for her family," recalls Joe's sister, Anna Brzuza. "She cooked for the people, cleaned for them and did their laundry."

The extra income covered the bills but little more. Siemienowski remembers his mother could not afford his uniforms for football or karate. A car was an inconceivable expense so the family relied on public transportation to get around. Siemienowski also clocked a lot of miles on his bike.

"I had one bike and I can remember my mom had to scrounge up the money to buy that," says Siemienowski. "That was a really big deal for me at that time; to be able to get a bike. We definitely struggled as a family."

Those days of struggling now seem a world away for Siemienowski.



The Class of 1976 alumnus resides in San Diego, CA and lives a much different life with his wife, Irina, and their two young children, Max and Michelle. As owner of Siemienowski & Associates, Joe Siemienowski oversees one of the leading investment real estate brokerage firms, located in one of the nation's busiest real estate markets.

"We help people purchase, sell and exchange small to mid-size apartment and condominium buildings and apartment buildings being converted to condominiums," explains Siemienowski.

And the market couldn't be better. With only 10 percent of San Diego County households able to afford the median priced \$593,000 home, demand for apartment and condominium-style housing has soared in recent years. This surge has prompted many people to invest in apartment and condominium buildings. Many, many more are doing condo conversions – apartment buildings that are renovated into for-sale condominiums.

Million dollar deals are common practice for Siemienowski. But rarely does he forget the circumstances from which he came, the resolve it took him to get where he is today – and the role his Canisius education played in that success.

"Looking back on life, those years I was at

Canisius were very formative years for me," says Siemienowski. "I went from desperation and not really wanting to be there, to really appreciating the education I received."

Academically, Siemienowski was an A-plus student. He attended Calasactius Preparatory School but transferred to Bishop Turner High School when the tuition became too steep. (His older brother, Henry, was helping to finance his schooling.) Still, Siemienowski graduated from high school one year early and actually planned to attend the Eastman School of Music to study violin, when his mother – who was also his first violin teacher – convinced him to reconsider the music profession for a more practical career in accounting.

"She thought the life of a musician was going to be pretty tough and she didn't want me to struggle," says Siemienowski, who then applied to various colleges and universities in the area. He chose Canisius because it provided him with the best financial package.

"I really had my heart set on going to Eastman so for probably my first two years at Canisius, I didn't even open a book," recalls Siemienowski. "I carried a C average. My head just wasn't in it."

Oddly enough, Siemienowski's outlook changed

when he learned of the college's karate club. Under the guidance of Larry Mowdry, then club advisor, Siemienowski earned his black belt in karate and became a regular competitor at karate tournaments.

Siemienowski's attraction to karate generated a new academic interest for him in Asian history. He recalls taking "fascinating" courses on the subject with the late and "very engaging" Edwin L. Neville Jr., PhD.

Before long, Siemienowski attended more social activities and channeled his competitive spirit into several of the college's intramural sports including squash, tennis and racquetball. He became part of a "compadré of guys" whose ethnicities were as diverse as the United Nations. "There was George Ghosen '77, a Native American; Ron Patenaude '77 was French; Mike Willis '76 was African American; and there was Mike Uschold '76."

Notwithstanding some "demanding" accounting classes, taught by the late Joseph R. Coppola '40, PhD, Siemienowski's grades moderately improved.

"I was raised by a single mom and didn't have a father to give me guidance," says Siemienowski. "To this day I believe my involvement with the karate club at Canisius was instrumental in giving me the discipline I needed at that time."

But it wasn't until after Siemienowski graduated from *alma mater* that he truly came to value his Canisius education.

Much like many young college graduates, Siemienowski was unsure of what to do or where to go next. He decided to go back to school and enrolled as a full-time graduate student at the University of San Diego, where he received a partial scholarship. Within a year, he earned his master's degree.

"Getting that degree was literally a snap," he says, "because, other than maybe advanced statistics, I had already seen it all and done it all at Canisius!"

Two college degrees made Siemienowski an attractive candidate for the accounting departments at SONY and National Steel but he turned down their stable and secure job offers when an opportunity arose for him to co-manage a racquetball club in Yuma, Arizona.

Surprising?

Not necessarily.

Siemienowski's "dream" was to play professional racquetball and his game was good enough to qualify him to compete against some of the best players in the world. Among them: Marty Hogan and Charlie Brumfield. As manager of a racquetball club, Siemienowski could earn a steady paycheck and advance his racquetball game at the same time. So, with next to no money in his pocket, he moved to the small, agricultural town of Yuma, where he lived in a tin garage. There was no air conditioning. A Harley gang site was across the way. And it was infested with cockroaches, recalls Anna Brzuza.

"For three months, Joe actually slept in his car," she says.

The living conditions were less than ideal but Siemienowski soon earned enough to move out and make his first real estate investment. He purchased a condominium unit for \$28,000.

Siemienowski was well on his way, or so he thought.

After only a year, the racquetball craze of the '70s calmed and clubs began to consolidate. Siemienowski's job fell victim to the down turn. Instinctively, he fell back on his Canisius accounting degree and in less than a week's time landed an accountant position at Western Farm Service, a division of Shell Chemical. Over the next five years, Siemienowski rose through the ranks to become the youngest comptroller in Shell Chemical history.

At 27 years old, Siemienowski was again earning a good salary (enough to invest in two more investment properties with his sister, Anna) and living better than ever. But by 1983, a series of ups-and-downs in his personal life left him nearly broke. He returned to San Diego to start over.

Siemienowski could have easily found stable work as an accountant but the thought of sitting behind a desk was too confining. Besides, he "had a burning desire to finally become financially well off." His real estate investments in Yuma were paying well, so Siemienowski decided to turn his penchant for purchasing property into, what he hoped would be, a profitable profession.

He worked in real estate sales for what he calls a "rogue outfit" and learned the business the hard way, working six, sometimes seven days a week. He was determined and disciplined – his education taught him to be – and within six months, Siemienowski closed on his first professional real estate deal. He recalls, "I was very lucky to close that deal when I did because I literally had no money left in the bank."

Business gradually became better for Siemienowski and over the next several years he ranked among the company's top three agents, and garnered a reputation in the business for being smart, personable, honest – and a shrewd negotiator. He also began to do for himself what he did so well for his customers – invest in real estate, particularly small to mid-size apartment buildings, as well as other residential properties.

"At the time, everyone in the San Diego real estate business concentrated on selling the big properties; the big houses," says Canisius classmate Ronald J. Patenaude '77. "There wasn't a lot of interest in investment real estate. Joe recognized this as a potential niche and took on those smaller properties, personally and professionally."

By 1989, Siemienowski had enough personal and professional knowledge in his niche to take his loyal client base and go into business for himself. The company specialized in helping people buy, sell and exchange investment real estate.

But as Siemienowski's business began to boom, the San Diego real estate market went bust. In 1991, the city's major employer, General Dynamics,

closed and thousands of employees went looking elsewhere for work. Construction jobs dried up and laborers moved to more thriving areas. Real estate values were hurt even more by the 1990s savings and loan crisis.

"Percentage-wise, investment properties devalued more than any other time during the last 100 years, including the Great Depression," says Siemienowski. "Vacancies went up. Concessions went up. Expenses went up. But mortgages stayed the same so everyone's investments turned negative."

Including Siemienowski's. He recalls having a negative cash flow of \$60,000 on just one piece of property. By 1993, his personal and professional finances were so squeezed that Siemienowski had no choice but to close the doors of his business. It was a decision he came to regret and after only six months – still in the midst of San Diego's economic recession – Siemienowski opened Siemienowski & Associates.

"We were scraping by with our finger nails," he says. "I would literally pray that I would win the lottery because I just did not know how I was going to make ends meet for the next month."

To stay afloat, Siemienowski worked twice as hard for half the money. He also signed some of his personal real estate holdings over to an investment partner. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that San Diego's economic recession – and its real estate market – began to rebound.

Siemienowski says, "Around that time, the wireless company Qualcomm established its headquarters in San Diego. People began to return to the city and our investment real estate clients started to get back into the market fairly aggressively."

So much so, that Siemienowski & Associates began to close on one investment property a week. Each deal averaged more than one million dollars in sales volume.

Siemienowski followed his clients' lead. After refraining from any real estate investments for nearly five years, Siemienowski slowly started to purchase small investment properties out of state, "so as not to compete with (his) clients." He bought one apartment building in Yuma, AZ. Then another and another. And over the next three-and-a-half years, Siemienowski purchased an average of two properties a month in Yuma.

Today, Joe Siemienowski owns 100 investment real estate properties in Yuma and Tucson, AZ; San Diego, CA; and Las Vegas, NV, and employs several management companies to oversee his investments. Coincidentally, the income from his Yuma properties alone have made him "financially well off," as the city is the third fastest growing area in the country! And he continues to invest. Most recently, Siemienowski purchased two commercial properties in Cincinnati, OH; Family Dollar stores. Combined, his personal real estate holdings are valued in the millions.

And his company?

In 2004, Siemienowski & Associates closed on more than \$100 million worth of investment real estate. It is well on its way to do the same this year.

And although the business continues to specialize in the purchase, sale and exchange of small to mid-size apartment and condominium conversion buildings, its clientele has changed.

"Real estate is over valued right now so our most active investors are on the sidelines and have been for the past couple years," he says. "Nowadays, 70 to 80 percent of our business is with condo converters – apartment owners who are renovating their buildings into for-sale condominiums. We help them market, and sell or exchange their property."

Nationally, San Diego County is second only to Miami in the percentage of apartments converted to condominiums. In fact, according to MarketPointe Realty Advisors, which tracks new home development, the number of converted condo sales has soared in San Diego from 306 in 2001 to 3492 in 2004. To further illustrate just how lucrative the condo conversion business is these days, Siemienowski tells the story of a doctor and his wife who, two years ago, bought a 13-unit property in Imperial Beach for \$83,000 per unit.

"They called me up last year to ask if they should secure a condo-map on their building," says Siemienowski. "Absolutely," I said. A year later, Siemienowski & Associates marketed the property and ended up getting the couple a price of \$210,000 per unit."

Certainly, such windfall deals have enabled Siemienowski to live a much different life than the one he grew up knowing and the one he spent much of his life living.

He and his wife, Irina, reside in one of San Diego's more exclusive residential communities. Siemienowski is "proud to be able to provide (their) children with things he didn't have growing up." He notes, Max (5) and Michelle (3) are involved in a variety of activities. Both play racquetball and Max already has a green belt in karate – soon to be a brown belt. And at 50 years old, Siemienowski is considering retiring in the next five years.

"A lot of people let success go to their head but not Joe," says Brzuza. "His life experiences have taught him to appreciate everything he has and so he is still the same person today as always: ambitious, generous and just plain down-to-earth."

Siemienowski adds, "I've learned there are no guarantees in life. It can turn on you tomorrow, so my family and I are all very thankful for what we have today. It's taken a lot of hard work and perseverance."

Along the way, Siemienowski learned another lesson that he didn't quite expect.

"A lot of Canisius alumni might say they don't use their education day-to-day but I disagree," says Siemienowski. "Sure, I could have taken advantage of more things the college had to offer academically or otherwise but I still left with an education that taught me to think in ways that other people might not. I just didn't realize it until after I graduated." ■