

# Paul Sergenian:

Storyteller,

philanthropist,

family guy,

rug man

By Amanda N. Wegner

**P**aul Sergenian is a storyteller. His favorite stories are of the old days, the greatest generation, dumping soapsuds out the backdoor, romping at Bernie's Beach with a bar of soap at dusk, being a "punk" and tough love.

Many times, the story circles back to his father, Ara Sergenian, founder of Madison's Sergenian's flooring company, his legacy and what he did with just an eighth-grade education. But Paul, storyteller, family guy, rug man, philanthropist, is writing his own story.

## **Growing up working**

From an early age, Paul recalls rugs. A rug buyer for Gimbel's, his father, an Armenian immigrant, came to Madison from Chicago in 1930, during the Great Depression, to start an Oriental rug cleaning and repair business. Nestled on Monroe Street, Ara would turn the dining room table into his workbench, and when the boys got home at night, each was expected to help in the family business.

"We were all brought up in the business," says Paul.



“We all had a job and mine was to pick up the suds and toss them out the door.”

Despite his young age, Paul remembers how tough it was to make a living — and live and work with a strict disciplinarian — in the company’s first decade or so of business.

“I remember in 1936, that was the hottest summer ever,” recalls Paul. “We all got whooping cough, but we couldn’t call the doctor, because then, they’d quarantine the business.”

Paul would also hide in his room, pretending he had homework, just to get out of work.

“Dad worked day and night. We worked day and night. When we lived over on the south side, we’d grab a bar of soap and go to the beach and clean up. There wasn’t a lot of time to horse around.”

Through the years, Ara moved and expanded the business, moving around the Madison area, including a stint on State Street. At some point, all Paul’s brothers and his sister, Miriam (“Dad loved to say ‘I have seven sons and each one has a sister,’” chuckles Paul) worked for the business. And though he tried everything to skip out of work as a kid, he went right into the family business after high school as a carpet layer.

“It was something I just did. I didn’t think much about it.”

In 1960, Paul, along with brothers Marsh and Ron, wanted to take the business in a new direction (wall-to-wall carpet) and bought out their reluctant father, moving the business back to State Street.

In 1967, Paul and his brothers decided to move the store out to the Beltline, then just a two-lane road.

“Dad said, ‘Who’s going to drive out there to see you?’” says Paul. “But it ended up being the best thing ever.”

Today, Paul owns the rug division (the rest is overseen by his nephew, Tom Sergenian) and was the 2003 top rug retailer of the year. His dad, he says, would be proud the business has come full circle.

### Helping others help themselves

Paul, a scrappy kid who thought he was “big stuff,” credits sports with helping him get his life on track as a youth. Once a huge supporter of Badger athletics and founder of Memorial High School’s Booster Club, his efforts are now directed to Porchlight, Inc., which works to find solutions for homelessness.

“It’s more than a homeless shelter,” says Paul. “It has nothing to do with panhandlers on State Street. It’s not about handouts. It’s about helping people help themselves.”

Paul’s first involvement with Porchlight was working nights at one of the shelters. A board member for 25

years, he is now a member of the Madison Cares Campaign Committee, which seeks to raise \$3 million to expand Porchlight’s supportive services and permanent housing options.

But the stigma of homelessness makes raising money and awareness a difficult proposition.

“I went on the news once, right after the humane society,” recalls Paul. “In that moment, I realized it’s easier to get money for homeless animals than it is for homeless people. But homelessness is about families. It’s about people who lose their jobs, go through divorce, depression. Real people down on their luck.”

Porchlight has over 30 properties in Madison, but you wouldn’t know it from the outside, notes Paul, “because they’re right in your neighborhood.” Some properties are for families; some offer emergency shelter. Some support veterans, and some support individuals with mental illness. In addition to beds, roofs and warmth, Porchlight offers support services to help people get back on their feet.

Sergenian recalls one family, a mother and her five sons, who were found sleeping in a car. With the help of Porchlight, the mother found a job and a house, went to school and earned a degree, and put all five sons through college.

“The people in this organization are passionate about helping people help themselves,” says Paul. “And me, I’m not trying to save the world, just helping people who are misunderstood.”

### A Sergenian on the floor

At 73, Paul can still be found walking the floors of Sergenian’s rug showroom, talking with customers whose parents and grandparents bought flooring and rugs from his father before him.

“People like having a Sergenian on the floor,” he says.

Last year, he cut back his schedule in the store to spend more time with his family. Paul and his wife, Diane, have five children, 18 grandchildren and three more on the way.

“My family has been good to me, even if I haven’t been around much,” says Paul, a statement that sounds an awful lot like one his father, Ara Sergenian, may have made in times (and stores) past.

“What he did was amazing,” says Paul of his father. “Life and business sure have their ups and downs, and as



I learned from him, family will help you through those highs and lows. For them, and for him, I am grateful.”

*Amanda N. Wegner, amandawegner.com, is a freelance writer and editor.*

**YOU CAN HELP** For more information on Porchlight, Inc., visit [www.porchlightinc.org](http://www.porchlightinc.org).