

## PROFILE

# Carrying on his father's dream

General Manager William Schickel has run the luxury resort Geneva on the Lake for two decades

By **KERRY FELTNER**

It took a dreamer, a century-old estate and serendipitous timing to start a transformation in Ontario County.

The dreamer was Norbert H. Schickel Jr., the estate was Geneva on the Lake and the timing was the summer of 1977.

Schickel's son, Bill Schickel, runs the luxury resort, serving as its general manager for the past 22 years.

Schickel, 71, is carrying on the dream of his father: to extend hospitality to a stranger.

"We're in the hospitality business, and so our goal is to the best of our ability make people comfortable, give them good value for their contribution and make it a wonderful time," he says. "One of the unique things that we have is our location in wine and food country; there's nothing like it."

Geneva on the Lake employs 28 full-time staffers year round and grows to 45 employees seasonally. Thousands of guests frequent the small resort each year, officials say. It can accommodate 29 people in a mixture of suites and studios.

The hotel ranked No. 1 on the Rochester Business Journal's most recent list of hotels and motels as well as the list of fine dining restaurants, based on average single room rate and average dinner entrée price, respectively.

The inn has received the AAA Four Diamond award, which recognizes the country's best hotels by evaluating factors of comfort, cleanliness, security and available services and amenities, in 33 of its 34 years of operation, the company says.

"Any business faces its challenges," Schickel says. "When you're new to a business the learning curve is a little longer, but I think we worked hard at achieving a very high standard from the beginning; that



Photo by Neil Sjolom

helps.”

Businesses have used the resort for conferences throughout the years. The proximity to Rochester has helped Geneva on the Lake remain in operation, he says.

Schickel is the second-oldest of 13 children—a family of eight boys and five girls.

His father, Norbert Schickel, was a mechanical engineer who studied at Notre Dame University, graduating in 1940. He also studied for a semester at Massachusetts Institute of Technology after World War II. He undertook a variety of roles throughout his life, including Navy pilot on an aircraft carrier during the war, dairy farmer and real estate developer, all prior to founding Geneva on the Lake.

“In ’45 he went to MIT for six months, studied aeronautical engineering and then (he) decided, ‘I’ve flown warplanes’, and he didn’t want to devote his life to building them,” Bill Schickel says. His parents “decided they were going to buy a farm and get back to the land.”

### Family farm

Norbert Schickel moved his growing family to Dryden in Tompkins County and purchased a 150-acre dairy farm. They had

## William Schickel

**Title:** General manager, Geneva on the Lake

**Age:** 71

**Residence:** Dryden, Tompkins County

**Education:** B.A. in sociology, University of Notre Dame, 1967; Ph.D. in economics, Boston College, (completed written and oral exams but did not do dissertation), 1970; B.A. in fine arts sculpture, Boston University, 1976; MFA, Boston University; 1978

**Family:** Wife, Katrina; children Luke, 46; Raissa, 44; Katie, 38; Gabriel, 36; and Anna, 32

**Hobbies:** Culture and hospitality, philosophy, agriculture and gardening, economics and business life

**Quote:** “I think we’re living in a time when people are looking for unique places. I think they’re looking for good service and good food. In a sense you can go anywhere in the world from your cellphone, and transparency has become more and more evident. You have to measure up.”

35 cows but knew nothing about agriculture. Norbert Schickel set to work to get an education in it.

His wife, Marion Schickel, raised and homeschooled the children through the fifth grade and worked on the farm.

“They never had farmed,” Bill Schickel says. “They didn’t know the difference between a heifer and a bull, but they learned quickly. They were pioneers, but it was telling of my dad and my mother that he would take on a place like (Geneva on the Lake)

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because it had been empty.”

Bill Schickel is named after his uncle, William Schickel.

The bond between brothers Norbert Schickel and William Schickel started young. The two attended Notre Dame at the same time and worked on real estate development together. William Schickel was an artist and worked on the design side of projects, including Geneva on the Lake. He collaborated with architects on projects that Norbert planned and built.

Schickels are doers.

Bill Schickel’s grandfather Norbert H. Schickel was a pioneer, starting the Schickel Motor Co. in 1910, one of the earliest motorcycle manufacturers in the country.

But World War I’s deleterious effect on the domestic and export market dealt a fatal blow to the company. Schickel Motor was forced to shut down, unable to compete with the popularity of automobiles.

Whether it’s his father, uncle or grandfather, Bill Schickel has a strong line of male role models in his life. He remembers one aspect of his father that continues to impress him.

“My dad was a grateful person,” Schickel says. “He was a person who had a grateful heart, and he always treasured the authentic dialogue that would happen between people. He was a person of great vision. He could come out to this place, completely overgrown, and he could envision its possibilities.”

Growing up, Schickel and his siblings were put to work on the farm. In 1960, his father put him in charge.

“I was fortunate because dad was a person of great energy,” Schickel says. “And he loved to take on challenges and really put everything he had into it. He didn’t skimp. He did a lot of different things, but when he’d focus on something he’d give it his undivided attention, and my mother was that way too. I enjoy that.”

Bill Schickel went to Notre Dame, earning a bachelor of arts degree in sociology

in 1967. He moved to Boston and began working toward a Ph.D. in economics at Boston College. He finished his oral and written exams but did not finish his dissertation. Schickel could not picture himself in the academic world long term.

“I did the classwork and I passed the written and the oral comprehensives, but I decided after that that academia was not quite in my blood,” Schickel says. “I wanted a more active business environment and I was also interested in maybe changing fields.

“I didn’t have the luxury of knowing what I was going to be when I grew up.”

While in college, he taught social studies for eight years at Newton Country Day School, a private, all-girls Catholic high school in Newton, Mass.

In 1973, Schickel enrolled in Boston University’s fine arts program, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in sculpture in 1976. He obtained his master’s degree in 1978. He then began teaching sculpture and design at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth for three years.

### Diamond in the rough

It was when his son was in school that Norbert Schickel found Geneva on the Lake, a vacant piece of property in disrepair at 1001 Lochland Road.

“Dad had the ability to take something on, and then once he got his teeth around it he wasn’t going to let go. He would just give it his all, and that’s what he did,” Bill Schickel says. “It was a tough project. He took on these challenges and he stuck them out and he just wouldn’t give up. He’d find a way.”

To most the site did not look like much, but his father knew it had potential, Bill Schickel says.

The building, constructed from 1910 to 1914, was the residence of Byron Nester—one of three sons of S.K. Nester, a prominent businessman in Geneva in the late 19th century. In designing his home, Byron Nester was inspired by the renowned Villa Lancellotti, built in 1592 in Frascati, Italy.

The Geneva property, on 10 acres with direct access to Seneca Lake, had fallen into disrepair by 1974 when it was vacated by the Capuchin Order of Catholic friars.

Norbert Schickel purchased the property and enlisted the help of son Bill, who had returned to Dryden in 1981 and bought land next to the family farm.

“So, willy-nilly, we were in the hotel business,” Bill Schickel says.

Seeking high quality furnishings for the resort, Norbert Schickel contacted the Au-



di family, owners of Stickley & Audi Co. in Manlius, Onondaga County.

Furnishing a place like Geneva on the Lake was an honor, says Aminy Audi, CEO and chairman of Stickley & Audi Co.

"It was wonderful," she says. "We loved working with them, and it was fun to furnish a place like Geneva on the Lake that is so steeped in history." The Schickels "liked the idea that this (furniture) is made in the U.S."

Norbert Schickel initially thought of converting the space into luxury apartments but soon realized a small resort would be more viable.

Around that time, Norbert Schickel noticed a newspaper article about an Italian estate, Bill Schickel says. "There was a picture of a villa that they were restoring outside of Venice and he said, 'wouldn't it be great if we had some sculptures on the terrace of Geneva on the Lake?'"

"That was the kind of thing dad liked; he liked it to be beautiful," he adds.

In the summer of 1980, Bill Schickel made molds of statues on the Cornell University campus, including replicas of the Venus de Milo and the Hera of Samos.

The point was to create a place of culture, Schickel said.

"In a certain sense what I've found is that a place like this has allowed me to put to use the things that I learned in art and the things that I learned in business and the things that I learned growing up on the farm and teaching," he says.

The first guests stayed at the resort on Thanksgiving 1981.

Today, the original goal remains: to be a place where people can find some peace, Schickel says. The challenge is even greater today.

"People come, we take them out on the boat for a complimentary half-hour cruise, and it calms them down," he says. "The stress of New York City or New Jersey or wherever they come from (leaves) and ... after a couple of days they go away refreshed. That's what people come for: to find quiet."

### Key transition

Schickel worked with his father for 14 years until Norbert Schickel's death in 1994. At that time, Bill Schickel turned to Alfred and Aminy Audi, who had revived the struggling L. & J.G. Stickley Inc. furniture company in the 1970s. Schickel believed the Audi family, as owners, could help keep Geneva on the Lake in operation. The Audis purchased the inn in February 1995 and

Schickel became general manager.

"We asked him to stay on because we were very impressed with his quiet demeanor and yet very effective leadership style," says Aminy Audi. "He's been a great steward of Geneva on the Lake."

Schickel says he was happy with the arrangement.

"When my dad died, we needed to carry on," Schickel says. The Audis "were the kind of people who had similar values in terms of a love for things, (and) they thought long term." With Stickley, "they took a company that was on its last legs and brought it back to life."

The reason the Audis felt comfortable taking on a new industry was because of Bill Schickel and his diligence, Aminy Audi says.

"It was a very wise decision on our part, and we would not have done it had we not had somebody of Bill's caliber to really manage the place so things really stayed intact," Audi says. "It was a very seamless transition. He loves the place ... and he really feels strongly about preserving something that was very dear to his father's heart."

Schickel has kept the family's vision for Geneva on the Lake alive, says his sister, Agnes Finn.

"I think Bill's a man of very strong principles and convictions mixed in with a lot of hard work and dedication," she says. "He's a visionary."

Having a constant stream of guests plays to Schickel's strengths, Finn says. He loves to learn.

"He's a serious person but at the same time he's a fun-loving person," she says. "Bill has a genuine interest in people, even from the person who delivers the mail to the person who is some bigwig in a corporation."

Geneva on the Lake was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1981.

The place has layers of meaning for its leader, Audi says.

"Bill leads by example," she says. "He's one of the hardest working people I know. He is very passionate about his work. He's very ethical and he surrounds himself with a good team. Additionally, I think he has appreciation for Geneva on the Lake because he and his father worked so hard to restore it, and when you're part of building a business or restoring it it's in your blood."

### Changing market

Today's wide-ranging hospitality market

still allows for places like Geneva on the Lake to be an option.

"I think a place like this doesn't fit into the kind of institutional model of hospitality. You create your own," Schickel says. Geneva on the Lake guests tend "to be people who look for a nice romantic spot to get away from the busy-ness of the world."

Carole Cascio has been an employee at the resort for 33 years.

"I have always admired how tirelessly he has worked to keep his father's dream and vision for Geneva on the Lake alive," she says.

Schickel leads by example. He also tries to be extremely clear about his expectations.

"I said to the staff, 'Are you prepared to do anything that needs to be done?'" Schickel says. "You may be hired as a housekeeper or a dishwasher, but I've got to be able to call on you in a moment's notice. You literally don't know what the day is going to bring and you've got to be prepared to deal with anything that needs tending."

Shifts like the rise of Airbnb Inc. and the popularity of the internet have had an impact on the hospitality industry in unexpected ways. According to Schickel, leaders need to be open to weather the changes.

"The business environment is tough now; with Airbnb, everybody could be a hotel," he says. But the resort will never try to be something it is not.

"I think we're living in a time when people are looking for unique places. I think they're looking for good service and good food. In a sense you can go anywhere in the world from your cellphone, and transparency has become more and more evident. You have to measure up."

### Family life

Schickel has five grown children and lives in Dryden near the family farm. He continues to be an artist.

"I'm a restless soul," Schickel says. "Leonard Bernstein said, 'If you want to do something great, one has to have a good plan and not quite enough time.' I like that because you have that sense of urgency."

Schickel does not plan on slowing down. He will remain in his role as long as he is able to, he says.

"I have a pretty good constitution, so I've been very fortunate," he says. "I love what I'm doing; so I'm happy right here. I guess I'd put it this way: I feel like the luckiest guy in the world."

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