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MASONS MIX THEIR CRAFT WITH A YEN FOR STARDOM

Ten years into their lives, Dean Marsico and his cousin Derek Stearns learned the masonry trade from Stearns's father, Arthur Stearns, who founded Arthur Stearns Masonry in 1959. They both recall his saying, "If you have a trade, you will always be able to pay your bills."

Ten years ago, they weren't paying much heed to the elder's adage. Though Stearns was doing some masonry in between gigs, he was acting in professional theater on the East Coast, and Marsico was in Los Angeles hoping to make it big as an actor. But Marsico gave up and moved back east in 2000, reuniting with his cousin at Stearns Stone Works, which had been struggling under Stearns's part-time stewardship. Stearns gave up acting last year.

But they didn't give up their dreams of stardom. Not long after their reunion, in a move that not everyone would call obvious, Marsico and Stearns decided to merge their acting and stone masonry skills. They created two half-hour episodes of a show they called "The Stone Guys" and submitted it to "every network," Stearns said. "Everyone called us back. And rejected us."

Well, not everyone. The DIY Network, based in Knoxville, Tenn., was starting a "man's man" show on building with concrete that sounded about as exciting as watching the material dry. They needed thrilling hosts, and perked up when they saw Stearns and Marsico's demo. Despite director Ross Babbit's opinion that it was "a little too schticky," he hired them on the basis of their credentials, personality, and humor. They're now hosts of "Rock Solid," which started airing in April.

Being family-Stearns's mother is a Marsico-the pair dish out a special brand of grief to each other as only family members can.

A typical exchange occurred recently while they were filming "Rock Solid's" 13th episode in Cohasset, at a classic 1951 cape owned by Charlie and Patsy Dean.

Stearns and Marsico were ripping out a concrete platform with slate and a step that was falling apart and revamping it using bluestone and cobblestone risers.

Marsico: "Short guy gets the inside."

Stearns: "Is that me? I'm just kneeling."

Marsico: "I thought you were standing."

Stearns: "The only guy in the family over 6 feet, and he thinks he's hot."

Marsico and Stearns are hot, in a boy-next-door way. Marsico is the taller of the pair and watches his weight, while Stearns, patting his midsection for emphasis, admits to indulging in Ben & Jerry's. Marsico lives in Norwell; Stearns lives in Weymouth. Both are 42 and married with two children.

So far, it's too early to tell whether their melange of masonry and banter is a success-the show won't receive an official rating until next year. But the stars and the network are hoping for a winner.

"It's a hit in my mind," says producer Joyce Pearson of the NAHB Production Group. "We were lucky to find great masons that are great on camera."

"It doesn't hurt that they're hunky guys. Their charisma and vitality jumps off the screen," says Babbit.

That charisma may run in the family; Stearns's cousin, Butch, is a sportscaster with Fox News. Prior to joining "Rock Solid," the cousins appeared on stage, in films, and on television. Most recently, Marsico had a small part in the television movie "Balloon Farm" (1999), and in the movie "The Mod Squad" (1999). Stearns has a long list of New England theater to his credit. He played the Father/ Steve in the Lyric Stage's production of "Curse of the Bambino," and had a small role in the film "State and Main" (2000).

But Marsico and Stearns don't just play stone masons on TV. They got the job because they're legitimate craftsmen who deliver credible information to viewers. For each episode, they select a project that takes about three days to complete, in some cases culling clients from the Stearns Stone Works roster. (That's how they got the Cohasset job; they'd previously worked on the Deans' fieldstone wall.) They look for an interesting location, and then create scenarios with humor. Pearson outlines the shows, and the stars fill in the blanks with their inexhaustible supply of petty family rivalry.

Stearns: "Where's the respect?"

Dean: "Did you ever have any?"

Stearns (to a laborer): "I'm better than Dean, right?"

Dean: "Derek stole my cornerstone!"

Dean: "I love frustrating you."

So far "Rock Solid" has also featured projects in Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Florida, Rhode Island, and North Carolina. Sometimes a project is determined by a trend in an area-concrete countertops are popular in the Southwest, for example-while other times, a location is a handy way to introduce a new product, like the brick veneer produced in Denver.

"We try to entertain with knowledge," says Marsico, who "became a cowboy with a twang" during a challenging segment in Arizona in which they built a pond and stone waterfall. His comment inevitably brings up the original home remodeling show "This Old House," which launched in 1980. While Stearns says that show "isn't his thing," he and Marsico acknowledge their debt to it. "They got it started and it lasted a long time," says Marsico.

"Rock Solid" has a crack at equal longevity. According to Pearson, who has been producing at DIY for eight years, the do-it-yourself genre has exploded. Stone masonry also has a bright future, says Stearns. "People are doing lots of renovations and . . . demanding old looks with old paving. If you learn in your 20s, in 10 to 15 years you'll be in demand."

It appears that their futures have a foundation. The network recently renewed the show for a 13-episode second season.

"These guys really stick out," says Babbit. "Viewers might tune in to an episode about a retaining wall, and think, 'maybe I could do this myself.' There's something real accessible about them."

Babbit hopes viewers aren't just there to pick up tips, but are inspired to attempt stone projects they wouldn't ordinarily consider.

"We combined the best of both worlds," Marsico says, "and we proved Uncle Arthur's point."

"Rock Solid" usually appears on the DIY Network Wednesdays at 9 p.m. and Sundays at 9 a.m.