

# MEET... THE STEVE IRWIN OF ROCKS

**Sam Harb can't read or write, but that hasn't stopped him becoming Sydney's paver king**

When Sam Harb came to Australia from Lebanon as a 20-year-old refugee in 1977, his main concern was saving enough dosh for the ticket home – he was *that* homesick. Three decades on, his contracting business, Sam The Paving Man, and its sales arm, Samstone, is a mega success, boasting projects such as Sydney Olympic Park and Sydney Star Casino.

His is a wog boy made good story; a defiant middle finger to those polities and doubters who say unskilled immigrants can't make a go of it.

Not that he didn't know a thing or two about working on the tools when he got here.

The son of a fruit stall vendor, Harb had sold lollies on the streets of Beirut, but after just three days in Oz, and with barely a word of English, he nabbed a job on Strathfield Council as a concreter. It was hard graft, but Sam was keen to make a go of it – and to fit in.

His first task was learning the lingo. As a young bloke, it was made easier by the need to meet young ladies. "Your passion as a 20-year-old is chasing girls," Harb recalls. "And when you can't talk to them, it makes you learn the language very quickly."

Without it he wouldn't have met his Australia-born wife Annette. It was she who introduced him to paving after he'd been working for a few years in concreting. Their home had a typical Italian-style backyard, concreted from edge to edge, and she wanted it paved.

That was 1982.

Within a couple of years he'd established Sam The Paving Man, but success didn't come on a platter. He and his wife walked the streets handing out brochures and fliers. It was by chance he ended up with a referral from the giant Monier company. "I had the opportunity to work on a manager's house," Harb recalls,

"but at the time I didn't know it was his. He was impressed with what we did and said go and talk to the people at Monier. From there the business boomed."

But he still had to convince tradies he was the real deal. Guys would doubt his credentials because he wasn't Aussie. "One guy told me I was a wog and said he wouldn't work for me, Harb recalls. "But I said judge me by my work not the colour of my skin, and he came on and we've been friends ever since."

Harb says that apart from having his wife at his side – she sits at a desk opposite Sam and does admin work – passion, and teamwork is the key to success. "When I started," he says, "I was doing the work myself with two or three guys, and it was a passion seven days a week. Some guys have been with us 25 years."

And with good reason. Harb is kind to his workers. He regularly puts on barbecues for them – there's even a kebab-maker on the office terrace! It's little wonder they call him the "Steve Irwin of rocks".

"You've got to be like a father to your employees," he explains. "We run this like a family not a corporation. We try to keep people happy. The hardest thing is telling people what to do. People don't like to be told, but we do our best to understand our staff. We would never have been successful without them. They are wonderful people."

After completing Sydney Olympic Park in 2000, a job that needed 14 million pavers, Harb took a break from the physical side of paving, and began training other guys to do the work, enabling him to hatch deals and plot the business's future. Sam The Paving Man now occupies a massive office and yards full of pavers in the Sydney suburb of Strathfield.

"I'm proud of being the wog boy who came to this country," Harb says. "Australia is a land of opportunity – it doesn't matter where you come from."

FAMILY AFFAIR: Sam's wife and two sons earn a living at Sam The Paving Man.



## LIFE PARTNERS

Sam Harb owes a big chunk of his success in the industry to his wife, Annette. Because he left school at nine, he never learnt to read and write, so his missus does all the paperwork, while Sam organises and plays the boss.

When they first met, Annette says Sam was wearing tight bell bottom trousers. "I saw this beautiful girl outside Strathfield railway station," Sam adds. "She was in Sydney from Tasmania for a holiday and she never went back!"

Getting hitched was part of Sam's quest to become Australian. "I didn't marry a woman from my own community, which I could have – we were breaking hundreds of years of rules." "It was a big thing,"

Annette adds. "His family understandably thought it would be better for him to marry someone from his own background."

Thirty years later theirs is a highly successful partnership. But how do they cope seeing each other day in and day out?

"The secret is about complementing each other," Sam says. "I don't get involved with the paperwork and she only tells me what I need to hear."

But there must be the occasional argument. "I'm very placid," Annette says, "work is work and home is home – we don't take work home."

"We've never gone to sleep without a cuddle," Sam laughs.

Sam Harb and his working mates at the paver yard.



Sam The Paving Man's offices in Strathfield, Sydney.



## SAM THE PAVING MAN'S BIGGEST JOBS

- Sydney Olympic Park • Church Street, Parramatta
- University of New South Wales • Star City Casino
- University of Sydney • Bondi Junction Mall
- Cronulla Mall • Rouse Hill Shopping Centre

Pics: Paris Spellson



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