

Corporate Member Spotlight: Catchlight Painting—Tradecraft as Soulcraft

"The word 'catchlight'...refers to the little speck of light that you'll see painters paint in...[to] alight a person's eyes," explains Deborah Costolloe of Newton-based Catchlight Painting. "If an eye is painted or photographed without a catchlight," Deborah adds, "it tends to seem lifeless—it's the catchlight that brings it to life." From this term, the residential painting company derives its name, one that speaks to deeply human values.

Nigel Costolloe, owner of Catchlight Painting, entered the painting profession by happenstance. To pay for graduate studies in political science, he joined a painting crew. Nigel quickly developed mastery while also becoming deeply interested in the business itself. In a way, it was like the wand choosing the wizard in *Harry Potter*, something natural and right, and where Nigel belonged.

Nigel, who has family roots in England and Australia, had a unique upbringing, much of it hopping around South Pacific islands for his father's business accounting work. Later, he attended an English boarding school before earning a B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley in Peace and Conflict Studies. His business education quickened in California's residential painting industry, one he found "a little like the old Wild West—largely unregulated" and filled with "station wagon bandits" camped outside of paint stores. In this freewheeling world, rock bottom pricing did not have to account for workers' compensation or other employee benefits.

In contrast, Nigel founded Catchlight in 1994 as a company that strives for excellence. For employees, the company matches retirement contributions, provides maternity and paternity leave, offers health insurance and extends interest-free loans for special events or unexpected medical expenses. Additionally, Catchlight gives its employees \$3,000 to learn a skill in any area whatsoever during the slow winter season. It could be, for instance, knitting or it could be carpentry—truly whatever an employee wants to study. Catchlight, which has developed an expertise in historic home restoration, also pays for its employees to attend training workshops. This "a significant expense," Nigel told in *Paint* magazine, "but it sends all employees a message: we expect them to be learning constantly, and will invest in them to make them better, smarter painters." Not surprisingly, Catchlight has foremen who have been with the company over a decade.



Deborah Costolloe



Nigel Costolloe

"We are really generous with our employees," explains Deborah, "because we want [our teams] to go into someone's house and treat it like their own and do their very best work, and we model that level of respect." With trust as a core company value, the Costolloes place critical importance on hiring. "We hire carefully and for attitude," Nigel comments, adding that they also do reference and background checks. These are employees who care about the clients. Team members have "deliver[ed] flowers when a project is completed (or an aged whiskey on occasion)," Nigel says, and "they've raked leaves, shoveled driveways and brought in the garbage cans" as appreciation of the customer's trust.

Catchlight also places community service as a core value. In 2012, when Nigel was president the Painting and Decorating Contractors of America's New England Chapter, he organized a 30-person team of painters from companies, including Catchlight, to paint the offices of Helping Hands, a nonprofit that provides monkeys to assist the disabled. With \$3,000 of donated paint and their \$20,000 of donated labor, the painters transformed the space. More recently, the philanthropic company painted spaces for Heading Home, which provides shelter and transitional housing for the homeless, and for Newton-based Second Step, which offers supports services and transitional housing for domestic violence survivors. In 2008, Catchlight painted the Jackson Homestead reception area as a donation, and in 2015, it joined at the entrepreneur level our corporate membership program, which provides critical support for Historic Newton's operations and public programs.

Nigel tied together his interest in entrepreneurship, community service and education when Catchlight launched its Youth Entrepreneur Sponsorship (Y.E.S!) Award. The award provides an aspiring entrepreneur from the ages of 15 to 20 funding of \$200 to \$1,000 to start a business. The inaugural 2016 award went to 19-year-old Lydia Jing, whose business supports high school students applying to college. "Everyone starts somewhere," the company's website says about the Y.E.S! award, proudly adding Catchlight "began with one person, one paint brush and the desire to grow an exceptional company." To quote Aristotle, "these virtues are formed in man by his doing the actions."