

Ann Arborites

Nawal Motawi

A life in tile

It's the monthly staff lunch at Motawi Tileworks, and Nawal Motawi and her thirty-or-so employees have dragged tables together in the middle of the factory floor and thrown open the loading-dock doors to a sun-drenched September woods, alive with chirping birds. Office staff and clay-dusted press operators sit shoulder to shoulder, eating and laughing, surrounded by stacks of tiles. It's a portrait of an industrial workplace that would have brought tears to the eyes of socialist painter Diego Rivera.

Motawi, forty-six, shrugs it off as no big deal that her employees are all full-time and that fun, creativity, and work-life balance are honored and rewarded. "Why wouldn't you want to run your work life according to your values?" she asks.

"I learned everything I know about management from *Inc.* magazine," she says, "and from really good HR people." Though she doesn't aspire to be a Fortune 500 company, she confesses that she does aspire to be one of *Inc.* editor-at-large Bo Burlingham's "small giants." New York-based Burlingham champions businesses built around quality of life and community, and, coincidentally, came up with the concept of "small giants" after studying Zingerman's.

Walking the floor of her Scio Township factory, where a worker is stamping out tiles one-by-one on a hydraulic press and others are adding glaze patterns with what look like turkey basters ("It's kind of like paint-by-number," one jokes), Motawi points out the "kanban" board, a sort of visual representation of inventory. Made of cards with pictures stuck in slots, it looks like the kind of record-keeping system you'd find in a day-care center, but it's the hallmark of a "lean production" system. Developed by Toyota to manage its factories, it was adapted to Motawi by a U-M PhD candidate in engineering: "He wanted to prove that Toyota's methods could be applied to a low-volume, high-variability factory such as this," Motawi says.

Point proven. What began in 1992 as a one-woman project—she made tiles in her garage and sold them at the Farmers Market—is now a \$2-million-a-year business, housed in a 12,000-square-foot building on Enterprise Drive near Baker Road. Inside the ochre-painted building is a retail shop, a showroom/conference room for big clients, offices, and the factory in back. Motawi, who usually dresses in comfortable but professional-looking jersey knits and clogs, has run both the office and the factory since buying out her brother Karim last year.

Motawi says her niche is "contemporary handcrafted tile in the Arts and Crafts tradition." "Contemporary"



J. ADRIAN WYLIE

is what distinguishes Motawi from its closest—both geographically and artistically—competitor, the venerable, world-renowned Pewabic Pottery. Like Pewabic, where she once worked, Motawi draws on the late-nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts design movement. But while many of her company's architectural tiles share the rich, hand-hewn colors and textures of Pewabic and other period tiles, Motawi art tiles, meant to be savored and displayed individually, are uniquely modern. And unlike the nonprofit Pewabic, Motawi can't beg for charitable donations to meet her payroll. She competes in the modern world, and her tiles fetch high prices—architectural "field" tiles sell for just over \$100 a square foot, and framed art tiles can run \$200 or more.

Because Motawi sounds plausibly acronymic or like an Indian word, people who buy Motawi tile are sometimes surprised to learn that it's the owner's name. Nawal's father, Kamal Motawi, came to MSU on an Egyptian government scholarship to study food science in the 1950s. He was, says Nawal, "devilish handsome" and proved irresistible to Karen Kitson, a nineteen-year-old Michigan farm girl in his calculus class. They married and spent several unhappy years in Egypt working for what she calls a "corrupt" bureaucracy before returning to Michigan. Her father eventually became director of research at Gerber Foods in Fremont, where Nawal and her four younger brothers and sisters grew up.

Motawi had a rocky start at the U-M art school in 1983, where everything seemed to be in code, and art was all about "the message."

"I felt that if you have something to say, and it takes a lot of words to say it, you should be a journalist, not an artist. Also, it's a way of rationalizing bad craftsmanship." She dropped out.

A few years later, she returned to try the less conceptually freighted decorative arts and came under the influence of Tom Phardel, a Detroit artist doing a guest stint at U-M. He took the class to see his newly opened Times Square People Mover stop, where he'd installed Pewabic Pottery tile. She felt her career beckon: as she writes on the Motawi website, "I immediately began to fantasize about someday making tilework like that!"

At some point in every interview these days, Motawi squares her shoulders and plows into the thorny subject of her recently dissolved partnership with her brother Karim. In the early days, when she worked out of her home, Karim, who had just graduated from U-M with a degree in English, helped her out from time to time. The business grew enough that she could offer him a permanent job, and he gave what they both now realize was a Greek drama-sized fateful response: "I won't work for you, but I'll work with you."

Her quick and naive "Okay!" yoked their fortunes together for nearly twenty years. Despite the company's success, it was a difficult partnership, and in 2008, Nawal decided she wanted sole control. Two years later, she, he, and several lawyers finished drafting the agreement that bought him out, but she admits he still won't speak to her. That split was followed by another—the end of her ten-year marriage.

Now divorced, Motawi lives on the west side of Ann Arbor near her ex-husband, so they can share custody of their eleven-year-old son, Kitson.

CEO of not one but two companies (having recently bought Rovin Ceramics, her clay supplier), she's nevertheless following her company philosophy of a balanced life. For fun, she plays the melodeon ("the diatonic button accordion," she clarifies). A former morris dancer, she now dances contra, swing, salsa. "I need to dance. A lot." She laughs: "This article is going to out me. I don't think many of the people I dance with associate me with Motawi Tile!"

—Sally Mitani

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