

The Shipyard and the American Dream – One Family's Story

Sun Shipbuilding & Dry Dock Company [Sun Ship], like many other companies along the Delaware River, was a family oriented company that provided the jobs that helped entire families rise up and claim their piece of the American Dream.

One of these families was the Kushto family, who had eleven members employed at Sun Ship from World War II until it was sold in the early 1980's and finally closed in the 1990's.

The first member of the Kushto family to work at Sun Ship was Janet "Sis" Kushto. Sis, the second oldest child and oldest daughter, came to Chester at age 19 after the death of her coal miner father in 1941 to find work and help her mother support her eight siblings still residing back in the coal fields of western Pennsylvania. While working as a waitress she overheard a gentleman talking about a welding training program at Sun Ship. She asked the gentleman if he thought that she could learn the trade. He told her that the shipyard would send her to school for six weeks and if she were successful they would hire her. She learned to weld in two weeks and worked at Sun Ship until the end of the war.

Shortly after landing the job at Sun Ship, Sis with the help of her sister Bea, now working in a meat packing plant in Chester, helped their mother and the younger members of the family (the two older brothers, Vic and Don, having enlisted in the Army) move from Windber, PA to a rented house on Third Street. Their first house in Chester, now gone, was the closest house to the shipyard at Third Street and Morton Avenue next to a tavern. Guy "Tuck" Kushto, the third youngest, who was about 4 years old at the time, recalls playing in the Sun Ship parking lot with his brother Richard "Dick" and the streets and taverns being crowded with 36,000 workers as the shifts changed.

After the war, as each of the siblings came of age, they in turn went to work and gave their paycheck to their mother to support the struggling family. Most of them eventually worked across the street at Sun Ship.

Sam Kushto worked as a machinist for a while and Dick and Tuck were hired into the carpenter shop, department 66. Dick worked his way up to be the foreman of department 66 before his death in 1979. Tuck worked in eleven different departments over his career and became a superintendent. Their younger brother Gary Kushto also worked in department 66 for a while. Barbara, Dick's wife, worked in the main office after her husband's death and later transferred to the Sun Refinery in Marcus Hook until her retirement.

The next generation started with Vic Kushto, who worked in department 66 for 24 years and was a salaried assistant foreman when Sun Ship was sold. Richard Kushto worked as an expeditor in the fabrication shop. Guy "Little Tuck" worked as a shipfitter and loftsmen and later went to Sun Refinery as a boilermaker. Don and Kelly, also children of

Tuck Sr., worked at Sun Ship while attending college. Don worked as a maintenance electrician's helper and Kelly worked in the tool department.

Today, the descendants of the Kushtos that came from the coal mines to Sun Ship more than 60 years ago have more economic opportunity and career choices than their forefathers. While this is largely due to hard work and sacrifices of the individuals, a significant part of this transformation was made possible by the economic engine and opportunity that was Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co. Many of the research scientists, business executives, contractors, business owners, lawyers, etc. of today stand on the shoulders of the Sun Ship worker.