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Executive Q&A: Renee Rockweiler Wilson wasn't insulated from work 'bullying'

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By Karen Rivedal, The Wisconsin State Journal

July 25--As one of the few female executives in a male-dominated field, Renee Rockweiler Wilson wasn't surprised to meet some initial resistance to her bid to help run her father's insulation services business in Verona.

It came with the territory, said Wilson, who started working full time for Rockweiler Insulation in 1995, right after college.

"I did find early on, when I was just starting out, that some of the contractors would try to bully me," she said. "They didn't know what I knew, but that subsided once I put in the time. I think that's kind of normal for anybody who is in a brand new position."

As vice president of operations, Wilson handles key areas such as supervising managers, scheduling and billing all jobs, maintaining relationships with vendors and leading customer service efforts.

"I never viewed it as a man's job or a woman's job," said Wilson, who started helping when she was in high school with tasks such as unloading 20-pound bags of fiberglass insulation from delivery trucks.

"I just saw it as my job."

Founded by her father Gary Rockweiler, the company started almost 30 years ago with one truck and one employee. It now employs 19, including 15 installers and a sales staff, with 10 trucks serving mostly residential contractors and individual residents who need insulation installed or replaced in the walls, ceilings, foundations or attics of their homes.

Depending on the type of job, the company installs fiberglass insulation, which is inorganic and dry, or cellulose-based insulation, which is organic and often is installed damp. Fiberglass insulation usually goes on in rolls, ideally as walls go up during construction, while the cellulose variety is blown into spaces with an air hose. Polyurethane spray foam also is used, usually to fill small holes or cracks for air sealing.

Wilson said the company weathered the economic recession of the past few years, when new construction and remodeling tanked, by focusing more on retrofit jobs for individual homeowners.

"We've held our ground," Wilson said, noting the company laid off only one employee during the downturn, and that person was later rehired.

"We're seeing a little bit of an uptick (in business) right now," she said. "We're going to ride that wave."

Q: How do your customers break down now between contractors and individual residents?

A: Back in the boom, 80 or 85 percent were builders. But now the majority of our business, a good 60 percent, is homeowners upgrading their homes.

With everybody's budget so tight now, they're looking for ways to save money and improve their energy efficiency with insulation.

Q: How much of that homeowner work do you do? Is it mostly seasonal?

A: Usually about the beginning of September we start getting all the phone calls from people who want to have their attics checked. Right now we're doing about 20 jobs per week, and in our busy season that doubles. Last year, we added insulation to 600 homes for the entire year, and did more extensive work to another 150.

Q: How many contractors do you work with?

A: Right now, we've easily got a regular base of about 100 contractors that either build new homes or remodel existing homes. Most of our contractor customers are the custom-built or contract homes, and they may not work constantly. During the boom, that (contractor)

number was closer to 200.

Q: What, if anything, does the public misunderstand about insulation?

A: The idea that there's one great product for everything, when really there are different best products, depending on the job. Each situation is different.

Q: How do you install insulation on retrofit jobs, when the walls of a building are already up?

A: What we do is go in from the outside. We usually remove a piece of siding in the middle of a wall and drill a hole and then put a hose in that will dense-pack the material.

Q: What is your company's business philosophy?

A: The thing we keep in mind most is to operate with high integrity, and to always satisfy our customers. For instance, a customer will call up and say, "I want to upgrade the insulation in my attic," so an estimator will go out there but see that their attic is fine. We'll tell them that. We'll say, "I'd be happy to sell you the stuff, but you don't really need it."

Q: As homes get older, does insulation often need to be replaced?

A: Depending on the product, it may settle over time. Or sometimes you have damage from raccoons or mice or wind. For instance, when we had that recent storm with straight-line winds, that wind can get up into your soffit and blow the insulation around. Or sometimes if you have a roof leak and your insulation gets wet, you would need to replace it.

Q: Did you always want to join the family business or did you ever think about doing something else?

A: At one point (in college), I thought I wanted to work for one of the big six accounting firms as a CPA, but then I got to know people who got in the industry and heard about the grueling hours and all of that.

So then I thought I could give my parents a great return on their investment of sending me to school (by joining the family business). And the more I worked in it and the more aspects of the industry I learned, I found I really wanted to be a part of it.

It is very rewarding to be in a small business, and especially a family business, because they do contribute a lot to the economy in terms of job creation. And being in a smaller business, I feel like I have better interaction with our employees and customers.

Q: What big industry changes have you seen?

A: The importance of air sealing, and eco-friendly insulation. Manufacturers have taken out the formaldehyde and are making products that are healthier. With the green movement happening all across the country, they're trying to satisfy that market.

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