

GROWTH AND PERSEVERANCE

Once-reluctant business owner expands store as green building movement gains momentum

Written by Jill Barville

She's no hippie. Nadine Sullivan, the owner of Eco Depot, a local retail source of sustainable building products, is living testament that the green building movement is going mainstream.

With a short haircut and corporate-casual attire, the 63-year-old Sullivan is all business, smacking down the myth and outdated stereotype that environmental consciousness goes hand-in-hand with dreadlocks and Birkenstocks.

Walking through the showroom and office space at 1326 E. Sprague, just a few miles east of downtown Spokane, Sullivan points out the recycled glass rosettes on the windows and the cork and bamboo flooring in the showroom and office. She is an encyclopedia of green building products.

So it is startling when she says, "I wish I was smarter."

Sullivan describes herself as math challenged, someone who struggles to figure out the features on her computer. Then she speaks knowledgeably about how a waste-oil heater works. Clearly, this former elementary school teacher and grandmother of nine has taken lifelong learning to heart and applied it to the

Though employees have come and gone, currently Sullivan is the only person on the company payroll, while her brother, Bruce Gage, serves as an independent contractor. She does it all, from educating consumers about product, selling goods, answering phones and cleaning the bathroom.

Still, business has grown a lot since the early days when she worked out of the trunk of her car and couldn't get a business loan until after she showed a profit.

Now, it is Sullivan's goal to "make her million" and ultimately sell the business.

"But I would settle for a million in gross sales at this point," she says.

She was half way to that financial goal in 2006.

Sullivan credits her family and the local chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners with helping achieve her current success.

"There are days you could just chuck it all," she says, shaking her head. "I would not be where I am without the support of women business owners, friends and family."

As one of the founding members and a former president of the Inland Northwest chapter of NAWBO, Sullivan has met with other women business owners for more than a decade, networking and encouraging each other in business pursuits while forging friendships along the way.

"Talking business is how our friendship started," says Spokane Valley Mayor Diana Wilhite, who also owns Safeguard Business Forms & Systems. "She is a warm, caring person that you like to go out and have a cup of coffee with, chew the fat, have a good time. And if I had an emergency or needed something, I could call her, and she would just be there, no questions asked."

Wilhite describes Sullivan as a businesswoman with tenacity.

"When you are starting out a business you have to have a stick-to-it-ness if you are going to survive," Wilhite says. "She has that. At times, she has struggled mightily and she has hung in there."

Cathy Doerr, owner of ShoWorks, concurs and says Sullivan has persevered, growing in confidence over the years.

continued page 46

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area of environmentally friendly products and business management.

Sullivan got into the business almost by chance. After a couple of years teaching in the late 1960s, she quit to stay home and raise a family.

In the late 80s, after more than 15 years as a stay-at-home mom of four, her marriage dissolved.

"Getting divorced forced me to support myself and the kids," says Sullivan. "I never would have put myself in this position. I never wanted to be a business owner."

At first, Sullivan renewed her teaching certificate and started substitute teaching in three different districts. The day-to-day uncertainty and instability of substitute teaching, however, was not a good fit for a single mother trying to support a family of five.

Neighbors owned Northwest Energy Products, a waste-oil business, and when they needed an office manager, she took the position. Five years later when one of the owners suddenly died, the business shut down.

Seeing a hole in the market, Sullivan decided to fill it. She started WOW Pollution Control Systems, providing liquid waste recycling products to commercial and industrial clients.

Over the years, Sullivan changed the name twice, first to WOW Energy Systems and later to Eco Depot, to reflect an ever-expanding product line. She says it was a natural evolution to add wind and solar energy products and then residential green building products.