

CLIMBING THE LADDER IN HIGH HEELS

Woman-owned cleaning business heads into second generation



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By **FRED POLLARD**
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EAST ALTON — Mopping up the competition, CR Systems Inc. has been recognized as the River Bend Growth Association Business of the Month for July.

“We were so happy to get this award,” said Kristin Tite, daughter of company founder Shirley Kleeman. “We are very involved with the RBGA. We go to all of the Business After Hours events if we can. You have to put yourself out there and be seen, and that is a great opportunity for us.”

CR Systems opened its doors in 1983. Today, it provides commercial cleaning services as well as an extensive office supply inventory including trash bags, dispensers, packing and paper products, restaurant and bar supplies, janitorial supplies and more.

Although the company is celebrating its 30-year anniversary, the roots of the business reach back even further.

“I purchased the business from the two gentlemen that I worked for,” Kleeman said.

Employed for six years as a receptionist for CR Oil Co., Kleeman was told her bosses wanted to close the business, and something told her this could prove to be an opportunity rather than an ending.

“I told them I wanted the business,” she said. “It was a real chance that I took. Back then, it was really tough for a woman to be in a business like this one.”

“It is an inspiring story of a woman who got married right out of high school, had four children, and then went on to become an innovative businesswoman,” Tite added.

In addition to changing the name from CR Oil to CR Systems, Kleeman soon expanded the inventory from mostly chemicals to include paper and other products.

“I went to the state and received some benefits as a minority business,” Kleeman said. “That is how we attained Olin. They wanted minority participation and came to me, and I was awarded a contract.”

Over time, Kleeman’s client list continued to grow, including retail businesses and city government buildings.

Before long, the company expanded into not only keeping the offices stocked, but cleaning them as well.

“We just kept getting calls — ‘Do you clean buildings? Do you clean offices?’” Kleeman said, laughing. “Finally, we just started saying, ‘Yes, we clean.’ And that is how it started.”

Today, detailed cleaning services make up roughly half of the business, and Tite says they currently employ a team of about 40 part-time employees.

“We clean about 40 buildings every night, Monday through Friday,” she said. “We do the Madison County buildings, Spring Resources, and we are excited to have recently acquired the Riverbend Head Start buildings.”

In an era where male-dominated businesses in the area were focused on cutthroat advancement, Kleeman says she took a different approach.

“I think we just were able to build a reputation from being kind to people, being honest, and really wanting their business and being fair,” Kleeman said. “Plus, we are fortunate that we are providing something that people will always need. Your office cannot go without hand soap or trash liners.”

During the economic downturn, Kleeman said they saw a drop in supply sales, but the cleaning side remained strong and, in fact, grew.

“The people we have doing our cleaning for us really do make our business,” Tite said.

Kleeman also has maintained a presence in the community, serving as a commissioner with the St. Louis Regional Airport Authority for the last three years, and also is involved with East Alton Beautification, the Wood River Moose, and a past member of Zonta International.

She also received an Illinois Woman of Achievement Award from the lieutenant governor’s office.

After 30 years, Kleeman says it is time for the changing of the guard, and she is looking forward to retirement, although she is technically retired now and stays busier than ever.

“I was ready to go last September, but we just kept growing, so Kristin said I could not leave yet,” she said, laughing.

Kristin is being groomed to take over the business.

“I am excited about what I can bring to the company,” Tite said. “I worked with my husband in the car business for 16 years, and when this opportunity came up I knew I wanted to go for it. One thing I bring with me is a lot of computer experience, so doing things like payroll and taxes are much easier.

“I think Mom really likes seeing me carry on the business. I have a 20-year-old who has also shown some interest, and we put my 10-year-old to work, so who knows ... this could one day turn into a three-generation business.”

CR Systems is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information, call (618) 259-3614 or visit the website at www.crsystemsonline.net.

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