

Hard Work Pays Off For...



Dynamic Color Solutions Inc.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Sarah Fister Gale

Cathy Higgins has been a woman in a man's industry since she was 21 years old. For many women, the idea of having a leadership role in the male dominated construction industry would be daunting, but Higgins made it work to her advantage.

The current vice president and co-owner of Milwaukee-based Dynamic Color Solutions Inc., a full line supplier of custom pigments for concrete and mortar for the concrete products industry, Higgins has worked full time in the business, which was previously owned by her parents and grandparents, since the day she graduated from college, more than 20 years ago. Her parents invited her, and her four brothers, to join the company as soon as they were ready, giving each a role that they felt fit that child's unique abilities.

Unlike some fathers, who expect their kids to work their way through every position be-

fore they make it to the top, Higgins father had other plans for her. He started her in sales. "Since I was a little girl my father said I would be great in sales," says Higgins. "I wasn't at first, but I learned."

Already at a disadvantage in the predominantly middle-aged male-dominated industry, Higgins was 21 and the boss's daughter, which didn't win her many supporters. Undeterred, she had a long-term plan to overcome the skepticism of her peers, and win their respect. "I spent the first four or five years of my job learning more about this business than anyone else in the industry," she says. "I knew it was the only way to gain credibility and acceptance."

"Neither a four alarm fire nor prejudice against women could stop Cathy Higgins from establishing her company as the pigment provider of choice for architectural precast."

Over those years she studied everything she could get her hands on about pigment and how it's used to color concrete block, mortar, ready-mix, and other products. Once she felt confident of her knowledge,

she took her show on the road. "I don't particularly like speaking in front of people, but I'm good at it and I do it a lot," she says, noting that her combination of knowledge and being a woman has an impact on her audiences. "Once I speak in front of people they know who I am and they remember me. That's good for business."

Today, business at DCS is booming, thanks in part to Higgins' marketing and sales skills, but also because of key business decisions made over the years by Higgins and her co-owner and brother, Jim Crawford.

DCS was founded in 1890 and at one point was the leading manufacturer of mortar colors in the country. Its primary product for years was natural red iron oxide that was ground to powder at the DCS mill and used to make red barn paint, setting a color standard for red barns in the Midwest that continues even today.

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However, the company has come a long way from its barn paint past. Run into Chapter 11 in the 1950s, by a second owner, Higgins' maternal grandfather's family bought the company and made it a subsidiary of the Delta Oil Products Company, which made foundry products.

Higgins father worked for the company for many years, until the mid 1970s, when, after a family dispute, he and Higgins's mother traded their shares in the Delta Oil Products Company in exchange for sole ownership of the pigment division, now known as DCS.

At that time 80 percent of DCS' clients were in the foundry industry and only 20 percent were in construction, but Higgins' father saw that the future was in concrete. "He quickly shifted our emphasis to focus on construction."

The transition took several years, but today, nearly 90 percent of its clients are in construction industries, and the company emphasizes its' work for architectural pre-cast concrete. The decision to go into construction paid off. Business has increased 40 percent over the last two years, and it's more than doubled since 1997 – the year a four-alarm fire nearly wiped out the entire business.

Rising from the Ashes

No one is sure how the fire began, she says, but everyone agrees that it was catastrophic. It began shortly after 5 pm on July 28, 1997 in the area of the facility where the ore milling was done. "The insurance people think it had something to do with the shut down, but no-one knows for sure," she says.

What she does know is that it took 25 fire trucks and 100 fire fighters to put out the fire that would net \$1 million loss for DCS, and demolish the building where the company had milled ore for nearly 80 years.

"The psychological scars are still here," says Higgins, who has pictures of the burnt building in her office to remind her daily of

the loss. But instead of letting the fire defeat her, she and her brother found a way to turn it into a business opportunity.

At that time, she and her oldest brother Jim, shared ownership of the company with her three other brothers, who had worked on and off at the company over the years but were not as committed as Jim and Cathy.

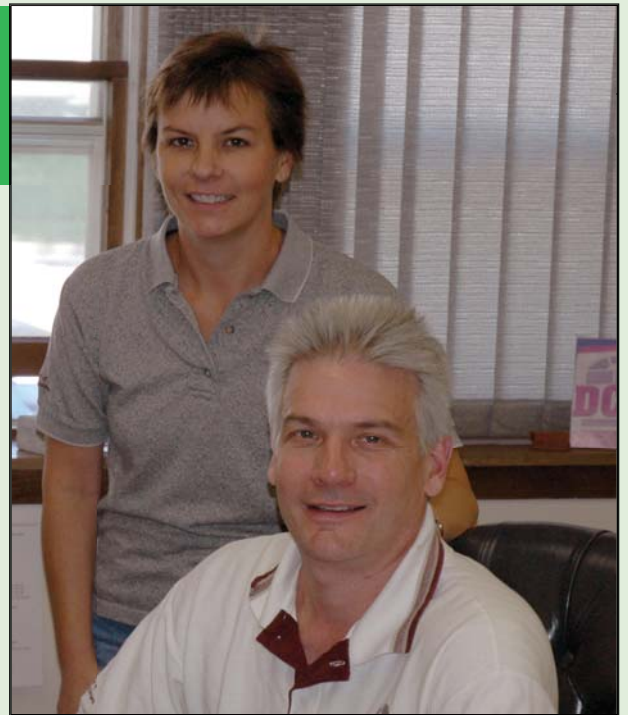
Because of the fire, the company had to sell off some of its inventory, giving the two siblings a sudden influx of cash, which they decided to use to buy out their brothers and take dual ownership of the business.

After the fire, they also decided instead of rebuilding the milling operation, that they would move milling off-site and invest in further developing the pigment blending and liquid color side of the business.

Miraculously, the next day, DCS was operational. "Fortunately the construction side of the business wasn't harmed by the fire and we found a way to keep on working," she says.

Unscathed by the fiery setback, the company experienced its highest sales month of the year that August, and business continued to grow. DCS rebuilt its burned out building in 1998, expanding the blending and liquid color manufacturing side of the business into that space.

Higgins was put in charge of the exterior of the new building, and she decided that if DCS was going to establish itself as a premier pigment supplier to the architectural concrete industry, she needed to show off her team's skill at blending color for concrete. So she used pigment in everything from the concrete block and mortars to the company logo cast in concrete at the top of a 10 foot wide column built into the side of the building and made from bricks recov-



Cathy Higgins and her co-owner and brother, Jim Crawford.

ered from the burnt out building.

"We had the hardest time picking colors," she admits. But clearly, she has a talent for choosing what fits. Even though the bricks from the old building weren't available when construction began, she discovered later that the pigments she chose for the building blended perfectly with the bricks. "It turned out beautifully."

Raising the Bar for Quality

Today the company sources iron oxide pigments on the world market, which it sells as-is or blends for the specific formula and packaging, needs of its clients. Its product line includes water suspension, liquid and powder forms of pigment, as well as pre-mixed color cement blends. DCS also offers private branding and will package the materials any way the client needs, from giant drums to soluble bags that can be thrown directly into the mixer.

"We do a lot of custom stuff," she says.

However, customization isn't the only reason customers keep coming back for DCS' color products. Higgins credits the company's ongoing dedication to quality and consistency for its continued

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business success.

Higgins admits to spending many of her early years in the business shipping product out and hoping there would be no problems on the job site, but finally she had had enough. "Who wants to do business that way?" she says.

In 1991, the business launched a quality and consistency program, setting high standards and promising clients that DCS would deliver the color they asked for without variation.

"We have a process to produce consistent color or the product doesn't ship," she says. "Our clients know we will match their colors every time no matter what."

That dedication to quality and consistency is particularly critical in the architectural

precast concrete segment of the business. In precast \$100 worth of pigment has the potential to cause a \$5,000 mistake. "The pigment may be a very small cost compared to the total cost of the project, but if you use the wrong color it will wreck a whole panel."

To ensure consistency, DCS retains samples of every batch of pigment for three years to ensure that if a client ever wants more of a certain color DCS has the exact blend and formula on file. The company has an in-house spectrophotometer that the lab can use to analyze color formulas, however she says the lab staff are so accustomed to comparing colors they can tell instantly if two lots are the same. "We use the computer if we need to provide documentation,

but our people already know if it's right."

That confidence reflects the spirit with which Higgins operates her business and deals with clients. Even though she continues to be one of the few women in leadership positions in this industry, she's proven that a dedication to quality, and a willingness to fight back even in the face of major loss, is what it takes to be a success, proving once again that Hard Work Pays Off.

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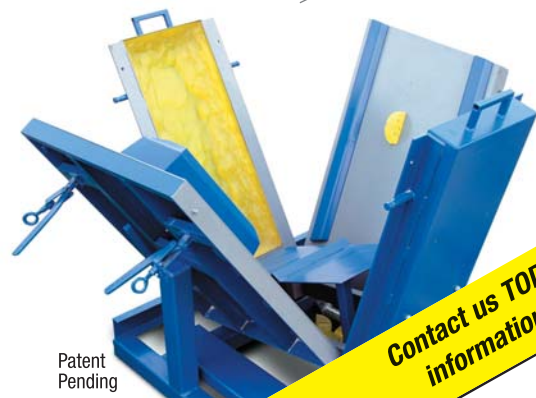
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