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MOVING FORWARD

Bouweiri has limousine company up and running

This is the fourth installment in a five-part series on women-owned businesses in Northern Virginia.

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Special to the Times
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As vice president and CEO of Reston Limousine Service Inc. in Sterling, Kristina Bouweiri sits behind the wheel of a \$6 million business, overseeing a fleet of 93 luxury sedans, limousines, buses and vans (the fleet size is ranked 35th in North America by the industry's trade publication), 200 employees and a high-profile clientele, including AOL, the Department of Justice, the IRS, Fannie Mae and the Hyatt-Regency of Reston.

As a kid growing up, Bouweiri fully expected to follow her parents into the Foreign Service. She got a degree in international affairs and promptly moved to Africa to teach entrepreneurial skills to women.

Her journey – from training other women to start their own businesses to becoming a successful entrepreneur – is a story of a woman in a male-dominated industry who has risen to the top with a lot of hard work, astute business smarts and a few lucky breaks.

Bouweiri was first introduced to the limousine business by her husband, William, who had started it in 1990 when they were dating. As their relationship grew, she took up his offer to join him in running the business – for no pay (except she could draw her living expenses). It did not matter to her that she was not making any salary, she said, because she was working for herself and “working on building the company.”

At that time, with five cars and \$300,000 in annual revenue, the company mainly served corporate clients and “high-dollar jobs.” While that game plan had worked initially, by 1991, with the economy in recession, business was suffering.

When Bouweiri came on board, she pushed for a change in strategy and pursued the wedding market. She bought lists of brides and sent out postcards about wedding specials.

That was a turning point. Soon they were handling 20 to 40 weddings a weekend.

“You could say that one of the things that really built this business was weddings. ... We were so busy that we were giving all the other limousine companies in town work,” Bouweiri said.

Things took an unexpected, but welcome, turn when two business opportunities, in the form of shuttle service contracts, practically landed in their laps.

“We kind of fell into the shuttle business totally by mistake,” Bouweiri said, her expression joyfully animated as recounted the story of the shuttle contracts.

They were tipped off about the problems the manager of an apartment building was having with her existing shuttle service operator. Following a meeting with the manager Reston Limousine took over the shuttle contract. The manager referred them to other apartment buildings in the area, and Reston Limousine established itself in the shuttle service business.

Luck also played a major part in Reston Limousine's breaking into government contracting for shuttle service. They were approached by a driver looking for a way to see his wife who worked at Reston-based U.S. Geological Survey more often. He offered to get the company a copy of USGS's request for proposal for shuttle service in exchange for a job driving that shuttle if Reston Limousine won the contract.

Reston Limousine soon got on the list of government contractors, and now nearly 25 percent of its revenue comes from government contracts.

With the trend moving away from limousines to group transportation, shuttle service accounts for nearly 90 percent of the company's annual revenue.

"We don't have any clients that say, OK, we want a limousine for three days," Bouweiri said. "That just doesn't happen anymore."

Bouweiri has been successful in growing Reston Limousine, in some cases because she is a woman and, in other cases, in spite of that.

She is accustomed to going into meetings inviting bids and finding that she is the only woman there.

There have been many instances when she has not won a contract. "I could swear to you that the only reason we did not get it was because of the old-boy network," she said. "Because it's a male-dominated industry, a woman has to work a lot harder to get business."

But, Bouweiri is also quick to point out the advantages of being a woman in this business.

"We're natural event planners. Women tend to treat each reservation like it's a special event," she said. "Women tend to be more organized and [pay] more attention to detail."

Bouweiri also believes "clients automatically trust women more than they trust men." Twenty-five percent of her drivers are women, and she finds they are well liked and more popular among her clients.

When asked what advice she would have for women who are thinking about starting their own businesses, Bouweiri said, without hesitation, "It's a lot harder than you can ever imagine. So be prepared. And always think positive."

Bouweiri taught herself to remain positive in the face of adversity, she said, particularly after 9/11, which she described as her worst memory in all of her 13 years with the company.

The company faced \$1 million in canceled contracts and a four-fold increase in insurance premiums and deductibles. For months after Sept. 11, she had vehicles sitting idle with no work. "Thousands of lease payments had to be made, and yet we weren't bringing in the revenue," she said.

In spite of all the "headaches" of owning a business, Bouweiri said the business is what gets her going in the morning.

She said, "Running a business is challenging; I think I like to be challenged. I enjoy all my clients and employees. I couldn't be happier with my career."

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