Shattering the glass ceiling: Granite City Electric executive personifies courage, discipline

By LANE LAMBERT
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As a youngster, Phyllis Godwin loved to play with the wire-winding machinery in her father’s store, Granite City Electric Supply Co. in Quincy. As a college student, she typed up invoices for him. But she never dreamed she’d be running the family business someday.

“You could almost feel it was strictly for men,” she said. “For women, it was an off-limits place.”

Then, but not now. After decades as chief executive, Godwin has come to personify Granite City Electric for customers and corporate peers alike.

Under her tenure, an $18 million local enterprise has grown into a $100 million regional power, with sponsor displays at Fenway Park and Gillette Stadium for national sports audiences to see.

For those who know Godwin, the franchise affiliations symbolize a recognition they say is overdue.

While the area’s business community has felt her quiet influence for years - former South Shore Chamber of Commerce director Ron Zooleck praises Godwin as “the first lady of the South Shore” - she’s drawing scholarly attention as well. This fall, a Babson College survey of companies run by women ranked her No. 8 in the state.

For a generation of South Shore business women, that ranking confirmed the status Godwin holds as an adviser and role model.

As the first female president of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce and first female member of a local bank board, Godwin became the example and inspiration she never had when she was blazing her own trail as a female executive in the 1970s and ‘80s.

“Many women are proud of her,” said prominent Quincy accountant Dolly DiPesa, who has worked with Godwin in the Chamber of Commerce and calls Godwin her mentor.

“Almost anyone could pick up the phone now and talk to her,” DiPesa said.

As she gets ready to turn 80 - and still chairman of her company’s board of directors - Godwin said she wouldn’t think of not taking those calls.

“You have to help pave the way for others,” she said.

As for being the face of the firm, “I still don’t identify myself as Granite City Electric,” she said. “I see it as my father’s company.”

‘You gain confidence’

Nicholas Papani founded his company in 1923, just three years before Phyllis, the oldest of his three daughters, was born.

A native of south Italy, Papani immigrated to the Boston area as a teenager and enlisted in the Army in World War I. When he left the service, he married another Italian immigrant and worked as a master electrician in Quincy and surrounding towns.

Seeing the need for a local supply source for contractors like himself, he started one on School Street, across from St. John’s Catholic Church. He took the company name from Quincy’s 19th century nickname for the local granite-quarry industry.
A graduate of Thayer Academy, Godwin went to Pembroke College, the women's school at Brown University. During college she worked part time at the store - but satisfying as the duties were, she knew she'd never be groomed to take her father's place in the front office. In those days, women rarely were. Like other men of his day, Papani hoped he'd have a son-in-law to succeed him.

Godwin settled for a one-year business program at Radcliffe College - Harvard didn't yet admit women, either - and took a research-assistant's job with a Philadelphia consulting firm in the then-new field of consumer behavior and motivation.

"I loved it," she said.

Then she married an aspiring writer and quit her job. They moved back to Quincy so her husband could work for her father.

For the next 22 years, she stayed home to raise their two daughters. The Godwins divorced in 1969, and her future took a surprise turn: Her father's health was beginning to fail, and he was worried about inheritance taxes, so he transferred his stock to Phyllis.

“All of a sudden, I found myself the majority owner,” she said.

She had three choices - sell her shares, let outside managers run Granite City, or run it herself. At 43, she went back to college, for a master's degree in business administration at Suffolk University - the first step toward taking the reins she never thought would be hers.

With no female business leaders to guide her, she drew inspiration from feminist Betty Friedan's best-seller "The Feminine Mystique." She still has a well-read copy on the bookshelves of her Marina Bay condo.

“She made me see that my feelings were right - there’s more to life than a clean house and well-behaved children,” Godwin said.

She supervised some marketing, attended national trade association shows, and navigated the cross-currents of puzzlement and encouragement she encountered from the men who were meeting a woman in their corporate domain for the first time.

"You gain confidence as you go along," she said. That's one of the pointers she gives to young business women.

Her father died in 1984. By 1988, she had supervised the opening of three branches in Plymouth and on the Cape and Martha's Vineyard.

That same year she was invited to be the first woman member of the Quincy Rotary Club. Her star was rising.

“I'll be checking"

By 1995, then-South Shore Chamber director Ron Zooleck figured it was time to ask her to be the Chamber's first female president. Godwin was honored, but not sure if she was up to the demands of that sort of prominence. When Zooleck told her that one of the Chamber’s most conservative members had bet him that she wouldn't accept, she quickly said yes.

In the years that followed, Godwin helped organize the Chamber's Women's Business Connection. A regional trade group named her businesswoman of the year. A lengthening list of women sought her advice on startup ventures, business ethics and other issues.

“No one has had a greater impact on the emergence of women in leadership roles," Zooleck said. “And she has done it in her own way.”

Her own way, according to Godwin, is to “listen, ask questions ... make them feel comfortable.”

“You have to know when to agree, and when you might want to be assertive enough to disagree,” she said.

In 1990-91, she had to answer the hardest question she's ever faced: What would Granite City do to survive the recession?

Two years after the company's first, dramatic expansion, a national economic downturn and a sharp collapse in the Boston-area real estate market left Granite City with depressed sales and a stack of unpaid bills that bankrupt contractors would never pay.
“Those were the worst years,” Godwin said. She froze raises, overtime and the profit-sharing program, but refused to lay off a single employee. She still counts that as one of her chief accomplishments.

Fifteen years, four acquisitions and 16 more branches later, she’s easing out of her direct involvement with Granite City. Godwin recruited Steven Helle, who’s been president and chief operating officer since 1999. For now, though, she’s keeping a strong hand as CEO and chairman of the board.

“It’s hard to leave your baby,” she said.

These moves come at a time when the company’s profile is more prominent than ever. At the urging of her son-in-law, Leo Meehan of Cohasset, the CEO of office-supply giant W.B. Mason, she pursued a successful sponsorship deal with the Boston Red Sox in 2004.

Granite City now provides lighting and other electrical services for Fenway Park - with the corporate logo on the Green Monster. That deal led to a similar arrangement with the New England Patriots this year.

Saturday night Godwin and the company are celebrating another milestone - $100 million in annual sales. She’s treating all her employees to an overnight visit to the Foxwoods casino in Connecticut.

Meanwhile, she’s keeping her eye on the company’s long-term future, by talking to a consultant for family owned businesses and in turn advising her daughters about their own eventual choices.

“When I’m gone, I’ll be looking down and checking on them,” she joked.

Away from the office, she continues to be active with the South Shore YMCA board, as her father was, and with the South Shore Conservatory of Music in Hingham, for whom she’s been a longtime patron. She’s playing more golf these days (“She still beats me,” Dolly DiPesa said), and is spending a lot of time with her grandchildren.

Even so, retirement is not a word Godwin finds easy to say.

“I’ll miss the idea of building something, watching it grow and develop,” she said. “I don’t know - maybe I should start another company. We’ll see.”

**Phyllis Papani Godwin**

*Chairman, CEO of Granite City Electric Supply Co.*

Education: Thayer Academy; bachelor’s degree in psychology from Brown University; business administration degree from Radcliffe College; MBA from Suffolk University

Boards: South Shore Chamber of Commerce, member and former chairman; South Shore YMCA; Horizon Bank & Trust (co-founder); Bank of Braintree; National Association of Electrical Distributors

Awards: South Shore Chamber, volunteerism, 1997; New England Business Owners, business woman of the year, 1997; Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year, finalist 2006

Lane Lambert may be reached at llambert@ledger.com.

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