

Business Watch

Editor: Dan Healing 468-0283, Fax: 468-0205, Visit us Online at: www.canoe.ca/FP/home.html

Family makes mesh of things

Kathy Soldan has spent most of her life building fences.

"When I was on summer holidays in Grade 2, it would be spend putting hinges together," she said with a laugh.

She grew up with Soldan Fence & Metals Ltd., a local company that was founded by her late father Harry. The company celebrated its 40th anniversary earlier this year.

It's built a reputation as one of Northern Alberta's premier builders of chain-link security fences.

You know, the kind your mom used to warn you not to stick your tongue on when you were a kid.

"Yeah, I did it - once," she admitted. "I guess I was a bit of a rebel."

Leader of the pack

Today, she's stuck on her job as president of the company, taking care of most of the administrative duties. Her brother Mike is a company vice-president, overseeing most of the day-to-day operation.

A pair of other sisters, Anita and Debby, maintain an interest as company shareholders.

The siblings had been involved with the company since the early '70s. But with their father's untimely death at the age of 60 in 1983, it was time for a second generation of Soldans to take over.

"Even though we'd worked with the company, going into the management level overnight was scary."

But they managed.

"In a way, it was fortunate for us to have been involved for such a long time," said Soldan.

Money Tip

Brother Sky-locks: If you are lending money to family members for investment purposes, Revenue Canada requires that you collect 4% interest - a rate likely to change after Sept. 30.

This interesting tip provided by Ron Siebert, investment adviser with ScotiaMcLeod.



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struction field," said Soldan.

"I'm sure I was in the minority back then. I was really fortunate being part of a family of three girls that learned how to use hammers and tools at an early age."

It was learn-as-you-go during the early transition period. But that was made much easier due to the fact the longtime staff seemed to like the family atmosphere.

In fact, long-term employees seem to be the rule.

"Our fence-building foremen all have at least 18 and up to 40 years experience," said Soldan.

Like many other construction outfits, Soldan had to get it out through a slow economic period.

At its peak, the company had 35 full-time employees and more than \$3 million in annual sales.

There was even a suspicion the company was outgrowing its two-acre facility south of Argyle and between the Calgary Trails.

But the recession tempered that optimism.

Recently, though, prospects have begun to look more promising. Numerous contracts, including CFB Edmonton, have helped rejuvenate the company's fortunes.

Employment is back up to 23 people and Soldan anticipates a \$2-million year, up from \$1.5 million just a couple of years ago.

"We're proud of the fact the company has built its name on quality," Soldan said.

"We use sound business practices and we have nothing to hide. We've built a lot of long-term clientele because of that."

While the business has been primarily with corporate and institutional clients, Soldan has noticed more residential customers are considering the low-maintenance chain-link fence option.

Confidence sells fencing

"I have a personal feeling - there's so much confidence out there right now," she said about the company's future prospects.

"It's a good feeling. No doubt, through the recession, we went through tough times. We had a good team. Now, we're ready to go for the max again."

Naturally, as with any family business, the question of succession comes up. Will the next generation step up to the plate?

"They're quite young yet," said Soldan. "I'm hoping we'll see a nephew keep up the company name."



Mike Soldan
Day-to-day operation



President Kathy Soldan handles administrative duties at 40-year-old Soldan Fence.

MENDING FENCES

Soldan Fence & Metals Ltd.
Founded: In 1957 by Harry Soldan.
Product line: Chain-link security fences, portable enclosures, interior partitions, electronic gates, institutional fencing, batting cages, tennis courts, animal enclosures, bicycle racks, emergency knock-down posts.
Corporate culture: Second-generation family business with a higher-than-average base of long-term employees. President Kathy Soldan and vice-president Mike Soldan carry on line of work started by their father.
The numbers: 23 full-time employees. Anticipated 1997 revenues nearly \$2 million.