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INSIDE TRACK
Rita Williams

Williams Exceeds Her Dreams

By Anne Bond Emrich

GRAND RAPIDS — Rita Williams' success at both raising a family and building a career could serve as an inspiration to any woman — and as proof that there's time in life for everything.

Williams, chair and CEO of Gill Industries, never envisioned that one day she would oversee a multi-million-dollar engineering, tooling and manufacturing company and full-service supplier to the automotive industry.

"Never in my wildest dreams," she adds.

She learned about the business from watching her husband, John Gill, build dies. Gill, once a tool and die maker for General Motors, always felt he could build better dies, she recalled.

So in 1964, with \$4,000 the couple had saved, Gill bought some used equipment and moved it into a leased facility. Rita's brother, Gerald, joined him the following year, and the company was incorporated as Gill & Williams Tooling.

Williams recalls it "was quite a challenge" when her husband decided to strike out on his own. She was pregnant with their 10th child at the time, but firmly believed that trying and failing was better than not trying at all.

"It was a little scary, but everything's worth a try if you have enough passion for it," she said of the business and financial risks involved. "There were a lot of weeks we didn't take a paycheck."

During the first year in business, one of the company's major customers went bankrupt.

"We ended up having to remortgage our house and our cars and we didn't have that much. We were with Byron Center State Bank and they supported



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/FILE PHOTO
Rita Williams has taken Gill Industries from an \$8 million operation to a \$100 million enterprise in 17 years.



us all the way through. I can't imagine we would have made it without their support."

Not once did she ever give up hope for success: "I knew we could always make it work."

When her 12th child was 12, Williams earned an LPN degree and worked afternoons at Saint Mary's Mercy Medical Center for five years. She lunched with her husband every day at the plant and kept tutoring herself in the business simply by listening and watching.

"I saw a lot of things I really felt I could help with. I saw things that needed changing and I knew I could make a difference," she recalled.

She took her husband by surprise one day by asking for a job — and not just any job. She wanted to be general manager.

As Williams remembers it: "He agreed, with a little coaxing, but it took a lot of time for a lot of people to get used to the idea."

A lot of people also believed she was going to fall flat on her face.

Williams came on board as general manager in 1985 and has since transformed the company by redefining its position in the industry and growing the \$8 million tooling and stamping operation into a \$100 million full-service supplier providing product concept, design, engineering, prototyping, testing and production of complex welded and mechanical assemblies.

How'd she do it? She says she simply had a vision and worked toward it.

She invested heavily in people and technology, and she credits a lot of the company's success to hiring the right people.

"I think one of her strengths is her intuitive skills about people in general," says daughter Joani Gill, one of six of Rita's children who work for the company.

Gill doesn't think her mother gives herself enough credit for what she has accomplished.

For many years the industry was represented by outside sales reps that companies hired to bring in business, Gill explained.

"It was mom who recognized we didn't know our customers well enough; we didn't know what they needed and we weren't close enough to them," she said. "It's really to her credit that we broke that relationship with outside sales and started our own internal sales."

Williams also saw the need to become a full-service supplier.

"That's what the customers want," she said. "It kind of separates us from a lot of competitors that don't have the expertise we have. We needed to separate ourselves and be better."

And the way to add value, she felt, was to get into the design end of the business and offer solutions to customers.

Today, Gill Industries has two tooling and manufacturing tech centers here, as well as two plants in Georgia.

The company just opened the Rita Williams Corporate Center, a former Gill stamping plant on Plainfield Avenue that has been renovated into a high-tech, open office facility that also stands as a tribute to the past. Its centerpiece are the old plant's original hoist and equipment John Gill used to launch the business 38 years ago.

Last year, Williams established The Gill Technology Center, where tooling and product designers, conceptual thinkers, machine and prototype builders and advanced process engineers come together and pool their talents.

"We're hoping to be able to let customers know what they need before they know what they need," she explained.

Gill Industries has a patent pending on a new headrest, which is the only one of its kind on the market. Gill is also one of the first — if not the first — companies to come up with a latch that latches a child's car seat into a car mechanism specially designed by Gill.

Gill also is poised to enter into markets beyond automotive. The company is currently working on a new concept for a one-piece pulley system for a client outside the automotive market.

"We're looking out five years to be considerably more diversified than we are today," Williams noted. "A lot of what our technicians and engineers do can be adapted for a lot of other things in other industries. I'm pretty excited about that."

The plan is to continue to serve and grow the automotive side of the business while looking at what the company might be able to offer other industries that they don't already have.

Over the last two years Gill Industries began implementing the Toyota Production System, an approach to lean manufacturing that Williams says has required a true cultural change within the company.

To help employees advance professionally, personally and socially, the company encourages employees to attend classes in Spanish and English as a second language and pays up to seven hours of additional wages each week toward class time.

Keeping employees happy and healthy is simply the right way to run a business, she believes.

The company offers employees 100 percent tuition reimbursement, apprenticeship programs, flex time, a yearly allowance toward a health club or Weight Watchers membership, free on-site hearing tests and flu shots, an on-site fitness room, and luncheon seminars on stress management and general wellness.

Williams sends every one of her 700 employees a personalized card on his or her birthday and at Christmas.

Not surprisingly, family is a core value at Gill Industries. So striking a good balance between work and family life is important at Gill, too.

“All our employees know that I want their families to come first,” Williams said. “Gill Industries is not their life. They’re here, hopefully, because they want to be and because we need them. We’re aware of that.”

The company’s most recent employee survey showed a nearly 90 percent satisfaction rating.

It’s the excitement and the people that keep her motivated and a strong work ethic that keeps her energized. Every night she asks herself: Did I accomplish something today?

Among her proudest accomplishments is her family, she said. That, and getting the company to where it is today.

“I never thought I did anything extraordinary — it never felt that way — yet I couldn’t have imagined the company would someday be what it is today. I can’t imagine what the future will be — because the dreams are still just as big.” **BJX**

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