

Editorial

St. Louis Business Journal

September 20-26, 2002

Doc's girl

Warren Buffett, I believe, has said that doing the right things in business is "simple," but "not easy."

For a while now, I've believed that there are many, many folks who if simply given the opportunity could

Reflections

Mark Vittert

run some of the large companies – very well. And I'm not referring just to the executives who don't get a break to the CEO suite – rather, I'm thinking about some folks on the assembly line, the research lab, the distribution system, and quite often someone who is simply running their own very small business.

We have witnessed lately, up close, that fancy suits, fancy degrees, polished manners, and the "ability" to decipher "complicated" deals does not always offer us the best leaders.

Every great once in a while, the clouds part, the stars fall into place, and a Seattle Slew gets a chance to step onto the track. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it reveals again that having heart, a good dose of courage and keeping it "simple" is plenty good, if not the best.

Early on Ralph "Doc" Schneidewind liked to ride cycles, motorcycles; Harleys. He liked it so much that in 1955, he opened a small Harley dealership in St. Louis.

Harley-Davidson went through some very big ups, and some very big downs, over the next 47 years. But all the while, "Doc" and then his son, Ralph, kept the family business rolling along. Doc's daughter, Pat, was just 9 years old when he officially sold his first Harley.

Pat grew up around the business, but not in it... she became busy, quite early. She left school after the ninth grade because she was needed to watch over some of her younger siblings.

...Certainly not a young girl's first choice of activities, but she was just fine with it all. Then, at the age of 17, Pat went to Beauty College to become a cosmetologist.

Well, contrary to "Grease's" take on "Beauty School Dropout," Pat should clearly be in the running for the all-time, all-world beauty school graduate. Pat began

cutting and styling hair. She shampooed and colored. She pampered and coddled and listened to her customers.

Pat became very, very good at her work. Helping to make girls and ladies look pretty was a skill and a talent that Pat would have gotten good grades at. But, as far as customer satisfaction, and caring for her clients, Pat would have been a summa cum laude at any school. For over three decades she worked hard and built a fine and loyal business.

But, still, Pat occupied a chair at a beauty salon – she was "just" a hairdresser – or so, it seemed.

It also seemed that way to the powers at the Harley-Davidson Co. Her Dad, "Doc," had died many years ago and the dealership had been taken over and run by her brother. But, then tragedy was visited upon Ralph four years ago when he had a brain aneurysm while driving. He survived, but would clearly be unable to work again..

There was no other line of succession for the dealership...she was "only" a hairdresser...Harley wanted it sold. Well Pat located some appropriate legal assistance and with their help was able to persuade Harley to let her run the business. It was a risk, but none larger than for her.

Wait a minute here! Just educated to the ninth grade, a beauty school graduate, a "hairdresser" was going to run a big-city Harley dealership? Not only that, but she was going to borrow a lot, I mean a lot, of money to build a brand new, much larger building to house this state-of-the-art dealership, which Harley was requiring her to do.

Well, three years ago, Pat Schneidewind Bush did just that.

The dealership is a beauty... it is doing very well, thank you. Pat has won Harley trips, to among other places, South Africa. (She took as her companion her best pal in the next chair in the beauty salon), and "Doc's" dealership is now among the best of over 600 Harley's dealers in the United States.

Over the years, Pat, in a very nice way and with a very nice manner, has accomplished a lot.

But, when asked why she really was willing to take such a risk, Pat replied that it was for her Dad and her family – she said, "That she just didn't want to see it all end that way."

"Doc" would be mighty honored.