

Large Category Family Business of the Year *Consolidated Supply Co.*

DESPITE TRAGEDY, THE SHOW MUST GO ON

By Stephanie N. Henschel

Suffering the loss of a parent is always traumatic. But in a family business, it can be especially so.

When Karl E. Neupert, past president of Consolidated Supply Co., passed away in December 2002, it came as a shock to his family, as well as his employees.

On Dec. 6, 2002, after months of not feeling well, Karl was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He died 10 days later.

The short time span between diagnosis and death gave the family little time to prepare themselves emotionally, let alone professionally. One question loomed large: What would happen to the company?

Selling it was not an option, according to Karolyn Neupert, Karl's widow.

Just before his passing, Karl told her he trusted her to do what was best for the business. She knew it was his dream to create a succession plan for their children Karla, Kevin and Kristin.

But more than that, he wanted the spirit that had come to represent the company among its employees to remain.

"When Karl passed, he passed a torch," Karolyn said. "The torch was the essence of Consolidated."

And she knew the company's employees would be as hard hit as her family was.

"Karl was a mentor to a lot of people," she explained. "He touched a lot of hearts."

"He was a presence," she continued. "You knew he was important, you knew he was confident, you knew he liked himself."

"He was a man that you were proud to follow because he was intensely true to his convictions, added his daughter Karla, who has taken over the role of president of the company.

His employees get visibly emotional when they talk about the late Neupert.

Even Bob Bruce, senior vice president and chief financial officer, whom Karla calls "reserved," gets a little choked up when discussing his former boss.

"When someone like Bob gets like that, you know it really means something," Karla noted, adding that Bob only worked for Karl for 14 months before his death.

Despite the emotion, the team pulled together.

"This team faced a very unique situation after Karl died," Bob said. "Karolyn got the team together and asked us to do two things: Help run the company and aid the transition made by Karla and Kevin."

And so the team did. Jeff Konen, currently the senior vice president of development and marketing, and a Consolidated Supply employee for a little over 20 years, took over as interim president while a succession plan could

be formulated.

"Karolyn's intentions were always clear," Jeff said. She wanted to turn the company over to the fourth generation. "I think that made my job a little easier."

Perhaps easy is not the word to describe the past few years-hectic or tumultuous, maybe-but the Neupert family and the employees have done their best to rally after their beloved leader's passing. In November 2003, the company celebrated its 75th anniversary, making another of Karl's dreams come true: to get all 288 employees from the various branches scattered throughout Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Hawaii to the corporate headquarters, all under one roof.

The event included a carnival at the office during the day, followed by an evening gala.

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3 generations of the Neupert family: (sitting, from left) Blake Press, Molly Neupert, Nichole Neupert; (front row) Abby Press, Natalie Press, Christopher Hockley, J.J. Hockley, Alishea Neupert; (back row) Brad Press, Kristin Neupert Press, Karolyn Neupert, John Hockley, Karla Neupert Hockley, Kevin R. Neupert

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"The moment, the toast and the memories will never be forgotten," said Kevin Neupert, vice president of sales.

Karla credits the ability of the company to survive for 75 years in an industry marred by globalization, to a competitive streak, something the family members at times have to deal with among themselves.

"Surviving 75 years takes a little bit of competitiveness," she said. "Competition between family members, when channeled properly, can be a good thing."

The challenge in that is keeping things professional.

"Siblings will talk more directly than other employees," she said.



Consolidated Supply Co. makes a point to carry merchandise from the finest manufacturers in the business.

"I think it's easier to disagree with family members than other members of business, out of respect I think," Jeff said.

All the tireless effort the fourth generation is putting in is for a very clear reason: to allow future generations-including the large fifth generation all ready on hand - to take over the company.

"I truly hope that we can transition the fifth and sixth generation as seamlessly as possible into the company," Kevin said.

"I think every family business hopes to continue, and continue to be successful with family members involved," Karla said. "The future is just building on the success of the past."

The fifth generation of Neuperts seem right at home at the company's headquarters, crawling around the inventory in the warehouse, or driving around in go-karts in the back pipe lot.

And, by all accounts, this generation will get along as well as their parents: The youngest of the clan, Molly Neupert, the 4-year-old daughter of Kevin and his wife Alisha, so obviously adores her oldest cousin Blake Press, Karla's 13-year-old

son with her husband John Hockley. She scampers after him like an adoring puppy dog, aiming for a ride on his shoulders or just to hold his hand.

Along with keeping the business in the family, it's also important to maintain the employment environment.

"As I look toward the future, I hope we can retain the feeling that we now have that (as employees), even though we aren't part of the Neupert family, we feel like owners," Bob said.

"It's a privilege and a blessing to provide an environment where people come to work with a smile on their face," Karolyn added.

"It's just an absolute privilege and blessing that (everyone in the company) has the passion in their heart," Karolyn said. "This business would not be in business without this team."

"It's a life's goal. I will spend the rest of my life doing everything I can to keep this company going," she said.

Added Karla: "The best is yet to come."