

## Allied Ventilation Blazes a New Trail for Women in Construction

By Mary E. Kremposky, Associate Editor

Two people and a pickup truck jumpstarted Allied Ventilation in July 1981. A full tank of gas and a wealth of business savvy fueled the growth of the company from an average sales volume of \$300,000 to a \$12 million a year operation.

In this case, this reputable, mid-sized sheet metal business is not spearheaded by the expected "two men and a truck," but by one man and one woman - Nick and Mary Seraphinoff. Mary Seraphinoff, president, secretary/treasurer and owner of the Warren-based company, is the first and probably still the only female owner of a sheet metal business in Michigan. Nick Seraphinoff serves as vice president.

### FROM FURNITURE TO DUCTWORK

Mary Seraphinoff entered the decidedly unglamorous world of sheet metal after an extended stint as a high-level manager at Art Van Furniture. A pioneer in the business world, she was

one of only two women in the upper echelons of Art Van where she designed operating procedures and bookkeeping systems, playing a key role in the conversion of the company's office systems to the then brave new world of the computer. She worked at the furniture empire in Warren for sixteen years, beginning in 1965 as a part-time office assistant at Conner Furniture before it was bought out by Art Van.

Seraphinoff brought her strong management skills to the as yet unknown world of sheet metal after meeting Nick Seraphinoff, a sheet metal journeyman working as a detailer, estimator and project manager. He proposed a merger of their talents - her business skill and his knowledge of the trade. A year later, he proposed marriage. Both unions have passed the test of time and have remained strong over the last two decades.

Mary recalls the day Nick popped the question: "He said, 'Do you want to go

into the sheet metal business with me?' and I said, 'What is sheet metal?' He said, 'You know how to take care of business, I know how to build sheet metal; trust me.'"

As the financial wizard, she was appointed sole proprietor of the business. "Nick was in management in the sheet metal industry and I was management in the office structure," said Seraphinoff. "We just kind of blended together and pretty much covered all the bases."

The willingness and drive to learn has fueled her business success. Over the years, she worked in many departments at Art Van, including collections where she learned the art of effectively but smoothly obtaining payment - a welcome ability in any industry. "Everything that I learned was on the job," Seraphinoff said. "... and I learned and I learned and I learned and I knew that there was still much more to know."

In the same spirit, she took a layout course to learn the basics of sheet metal. Her knowledge has widened over the years, and today she serves in a leadership role as president of the Metropolitan Detroit Chapter of SMACNA, the Sheet Metal & Air Conditioning Contractors National Association.

**LAUNCHING THE BUSINESS**

After launching their fledgling enterprise, Seraphinoff continued to work a final brief three months at Art Van before taking the plunge. Their home was their first office. "We had a room with two desks facing each other," she recalled. She handled accounting and administration, and Nick was in charge of engineering and construction; together, they estimated jobs.

The very first job was work on a mechanical contractor's office, said Nick Seraphinoff. The budding firm obtained their first sizeable job in the spring of 1982 for Sinai Hospital. Mary remembers the exact job number of the project that gave the firm its first big break: "Job No. 1040 at Sinai was about \$149,000 with \$50,000 in extras."

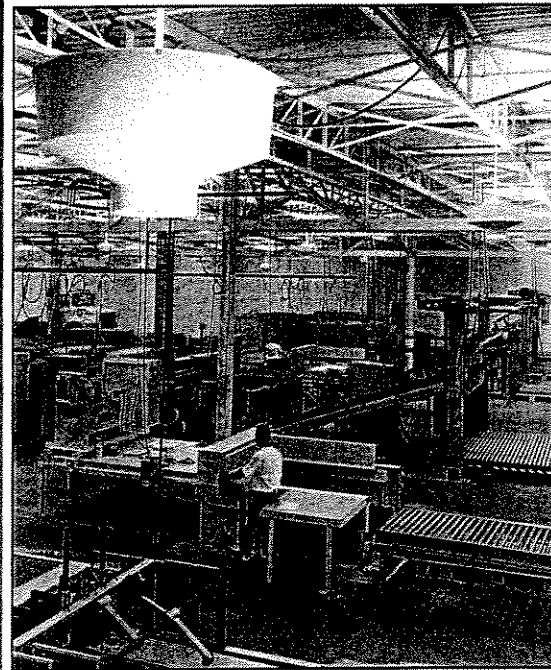
Today, the successful firm can list Comerica Park as Allied's largest job to date. Allied Ventilation performed the base sheet metal contract for Comerica Park, executed the contract for the new Wayne County Juvenile Detention facility in downtown Detroit, and recently completed work for GM's world headquarters in the Renaissance Center. Prominent past projects include work at the Whitney, but the firm's staple projects are sheet metal installations throughout the automotive plants of southeastern Michigan.

The Seraphinoffs left their "cozy" home office and opened a shop and office facility in Troy three years after starting the company. For the last decade, each has enjoyed their own spacious office in the firm's Warren complex near Groesbeck Highway.

**STEADY PROGRESS**

The Seraphinoffs attribute their success and longevity to hard work and slow, steady growth. "We have grown a little bit every year for eighteen years," said Nick. "That's what does most contractors in - they get greedy and

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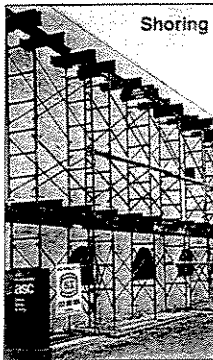
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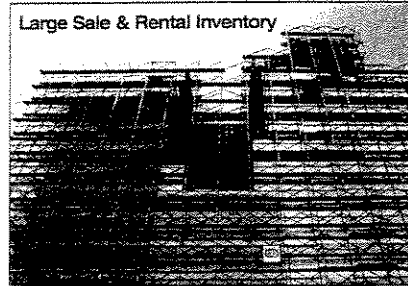
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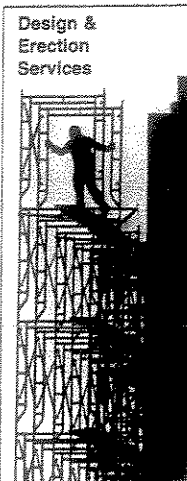
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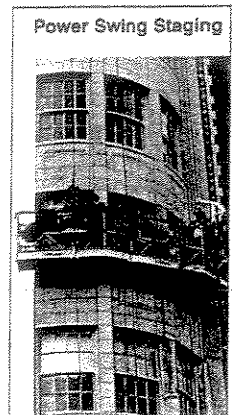


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they try to grow too fast. Our average sales volume has grown from probably \$300,000 to an average of \$10 million to \$12 million dollars a year. So, over the course of eighteen years, we have grown by a little over half a million per year."

The key to business success is "always stretching to your limit, but knowing what the limit is," said Mary.

She stretches a rubber band in small inchworm-like motions, stretching slightly, moving forward, but never overstretching enough to snap the rubber band.

The firm averages about eighty employees in-house and in the field. "We have had up to 120 employees, but right now we have about sixty," Mary said, "because we just finished the

Renaissance Center and Comerica Park. We are now in the position of moving forward for our next stretch.

"... In the beginning, we had to prove ourselves as a viable company, and then I had to prove myself as a businesswomen," Seraphinoff said. She views her leadership in SMACNA as a sign of acceptance by her peers in the sheet metal field.

#### AN INDUSTRY LEADER

Mary Seraphinoff has built a quality enterprise and has emerged as an industry leader in SMACNA, using the same steady application of effort and patient cultivation of success in both endeavors. In 1995, Seraphinoff earned a place on SMACNA's board of directors, first serving as a board member, then as secretary/treasurer and finally as vice president. In 1998, she was re-elected to her second term on the board, initially serving another stint as vice president, and now serving as president of the Metropolitan Detroit Chapter for the year 2000. She is the first woman to have served on the board, making her the first female officer and female president of the organization.

"I think that my acceptance in this male-dominated field was a gradual evolution," said Seraphinoff. "As I felt more comfortable with my peers, I began verbalizing my thoughts, offering suggestions and voicing my opinions."

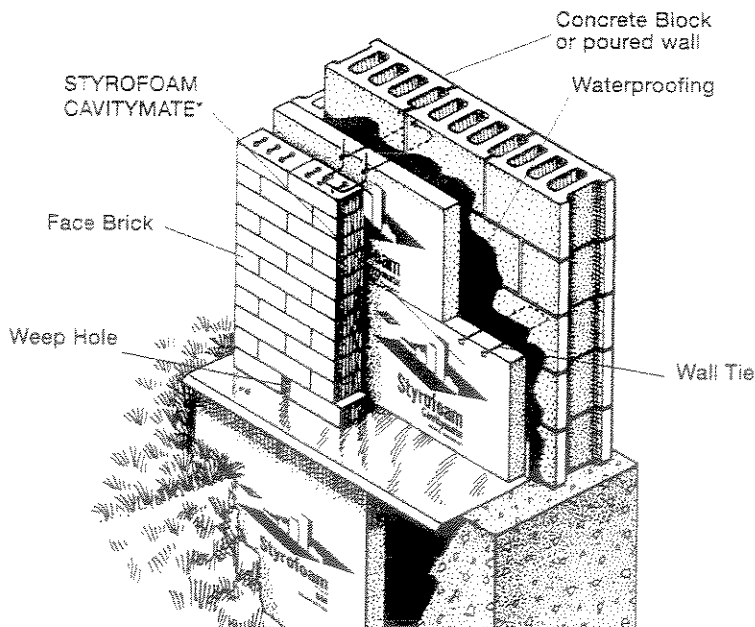
As president of SMACNA, Seraphinoff is charged with providing its membership with the best services, skills and products available in the sheet metal industry. SMACNA Detroit is primarily involved in labor relations activities on behalf of its members with Sheet Metal Workers Local Union #80, representing approximately 125 contractors who employ some 1200 sheet metal workers throughout southeastern Michigan. SMACNA Detroit is heavily involved with the inspection community, unfair utility competition, legislative and political action, safety, code enforcement and other technical and educational programs on an ongoing basis.

After a half decade of being on the board, Seraphinoff is still the only woman on SMACNA's board of direc-

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tors. But the industry has changed over the last twenty years. "Eighteen years ago, it was really a man's industry, much more so than it is today," said Seraphinoff. Today, Connie Bourcier, Allied Ventilation's shop foreman, is one of the few women working in that capacity in the sheet metal industry. "I am not the reason that Connie holds this position," said Seraphinoff. "No, she is there because she knows what has to be done and she does it.

"...I think a woman should not let her gender be used either for her or against her," continued Seraphinoff. "I really think that it's wrong for people to use gender or race to gain unfair advantage, just as gender or race should not be used to discriminate against them."

#### COMMUNITY SERVICE

She credits her hard work, clear thinking and a calm, logical approach as the inner qualities leading to success. She carries this same calm, collected and action-oriented approach into her personal life, turning the tragedy of her 28-year-old son's sudden death into an opportunity for community service. Her son, Michael McCann, died of Marfan Syndrome, a rare connective tissue disorder. Misdiagnosed in the emergency room, he died of an aortic aneurysm resulting from the condition.

Many tall, thin people with double-jointedness, long fingers and crowded teeth unknowingly have the disorder, which is not dangerous or deadly until it impacts the heart, thinning the aorta and inducing an aortic aneurysm. Seraphinoff raised \$30,000 dollars over the course of three years for the National Marfan Foundation to increase awareness of the syndrome.

"There is nothing I can do to bring him back to life, but maybe I can do something to raise awareness, so that others may be saved," she said. "The weakened aorta can be surgically corrected, if properly diagnosed."

Strong in adversity and persistent in business, Mary Seraphinoff has launched her life in often uncharted waters and steered toward success with the eye of a calm captain, offering her services and gifts to the industry and to the community. ☺

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