Woman in charge: East Muskegon leverages strengths to adapt to changing business

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NORTH MUSKEGON — After more than 40 years of marriage, Eileen Kanaar knows what it takes to get her husband, Greg, to listen. But now that she’s majority owner of their family-owned business, she’s also learning what it’s like to be his boss.

It's a good thing they share a good sense of humor.

Eileen and Greg Kanaar have guided East Muskegon Roofing and Sheet Metal through many industry changes, including most recently, the company’s becoming a certified woman-owned business. PHOTO: JOE BOOMGAARD

After more than 60 years in operation, East Muskegon Roofing and Sheet Metal Co. Inc. again has a woman in charge. In March, the Women's Business Enterprise National Council after a four-month process certified the company as a Women's Business Enterprise, which affirms that the company is woman-owned, operated and controlled.
This isn't the first time a woman occupied the corner office. When founder Joseph Smith died in 1975, his widow, Donna, took it over for a couple of years before selling to her brother, Ron Kanaar, and his sons, Gary and Greg.

Greg and Eileen Kanaar became the eventual owners in 2000. Recently, they decided the timing was right for Eileen to transition into the role of majority owner.

"We wanted to make it woman-owned to bring a unique perspective to sheet metal and roofing work," Greg Kanaar told MiBiz. "Once we were clear of the buyout, Eileen and I were not getting any younger, and we decided this certainly can't hurt us. We've actually worked together for a long time. We're definitely a team."

Eileen Kanaar said the certification opens up some new opportunities in marketing and contracting. Many customers today and many government contracts are looking to support women-owned and minority-owned businesses whenever possible, she said.

Having started with the company in 1985, Eileen Kanaar oversees the day-to-day operations and manages the company's home office with a laser-like focus on the company's cash flow. East Muskegon also owns Certified Sheet Metal, a Walker-based division.

"I don't feel any different," she said. "I've become very entrenched in the company. Even when I wasn't working here, I lived it through (Greg)."

Throughout a turbulent period that saw several of the company's long-standing and largest customers go out of business, East Muskegon has remained committed to being adaptive, she said.

At one time, Muskegon's S.D. Warren — later Sappi Fine Paper — accounted for 75 percent of the company's business. Today, the paper mill, like Sealed Power Corp. — another former customer — has been leveled for redevelopment.

But East Muskegon has learned to adapt. As the pharmaceutical industry took off, the company leveraged its sheet metal workforce to develop a specialty in
stainless steel fabrication, which later helped it get contracts in the food processing sector as the drug company business contracted to some extent.

"One of the good reasons for our success is our long-term workforce," Eileen Kanaar said. "We have high-skilled labor that's willing to improve their skills."

As owners of a union shop, the Kanaars credit the available, skilled workforce and the apprenticeship programs for helping the company diversify.

For example, through the recession, the roofing industry has become complicated as companies seem to appear from thin air to bid on even the smallest of jobs, Greg Kanaar said. East Muskegon is often the only union shop bidding on the jobs, competing against contractors that use temporary workers.

"You have to really work to get some of these jobs," he said, noting it took nearly a year of negotiation to secure a contract to install a roof at the Continental Dairy plant in Coopersville. "We had to be more aggressive. We went out and found what work was there."

The Kanaars said that "bullheaded perseverance" has paid off, despite the recession. To stay busy, the company broadened its geographic reach out of Michigan and even started fabricating orders for export to Canada and Europe.

"Our employees say that no one has told East Muskegon there was a recession going on," said Lucrezia Esteban, accounting manager at the company.

While the company relies on its skilled workforce, it also knows to stick within its specialty, Eileen Kanaar said.

"It's a family business with its ups and downs ... but we're tenacious. We'll do whatever it takes," Eileen Kanaar said. "We can do big jobs, but our niche is small to medium-size jobs. I like to say we do fabrication and shipping on anything from $50 to $500,000."