

2 Upstate women share secrets to being entrepreneurs

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(Photo: JOSH MORGAN/Staff)

Horses and math were already on the list of things that two Upstate women entrepreneurs have in common.

Just this month, a national nonprofit organization and a global services company gave Debbie Gentry and Pamela Evette one more thing to add to their list of commonalities.

The companies owned by Gentry and Evette were both named in the 10th annual ranking of the top 50 Fastest-Growing Women-Owned/Led Companies.

The ranking co-sponsored by the Women Presidents Organization (WPO) and American Express ranking includes privately held, women-owned/led companies worldwide that have reached an annual revenue of at

least \$500,000 of as January 2012.

Companies were ranked according to a sales growth formula that combines percentage and absolute growth, a WPO statement said.

Gentry's five-year-old staffing company, Contingent Resources Solutions (CRS) in Duncan, ranked 10th on the list. Her company's gross revenue grew from \$11.9 million to \$14 million in two year's time, a spokesperson for WPO said.



Debbie Gentry poses for a portrait in her office at CRS, a staffing company in Duncan, S.C., on Tuesday, May 23, 2017. (Photo: JOSH MORGAN/Staff)

Brittany Lee, controller at CRS, began working at CRS in 2015. Gentry is not just Lee's boss, she's her mentor.

"In the short time I've been here I've seen the accomplishments. I've also seen the struggles," Lee said. "It's not one of those things where 'I've reached the top 10 for fastest growing (women-owned companies) and I don't care anymore.' She continuously gives it her all. I can;t wait to see what else is in store. I'm super excited."

"She has taken me under her wing and taught me things about the industry from a financial aspect that I didn't know," Lee said

Evette's 17-year-old firm, Quality Business Solutions (QBS) in Travelers Rest, was ranked 17.

The firm, which provides payroll and benefits administration, human resources and other services, increased its gross revenue from \$906 million in 2014 to more than \$1 billion last year, the spokesperson said.

Jenny Smith, controller at QBS, said what she admires most about Evette is that she has "completely built this business from scratch all while being a dedicated wife and mom."

"As a new mom, I find that so inspiring. Even today, Pamela is engaged in the business while empowering her employees to execute the day-to-day functions of the company," Smith said.

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The 50 fastest companies ranked generated a combined \$7.2 billion in 2016 revenues (mean of \$155.6 million) and collectively employed 46,000 in 2016 (mean of 725), the WPO said.

The firms owned by Gentry and Evette were the only South Carolina-based companies in the top 50 ranking.

Others before self

Before Gentry began growing her own firm, she was a certified public accountant, working in public accounting, helping other companies grow.

Gentry came to Greenville when her husband's job transferred them here from Florida.

She worked here as a controller for a start-up chemical company. When that company grew into a \$55 million business, the owner sold it to a German global company, Gentry said.

She stayed on as a site manager until the company decided to move to Michigan. Then, Gentry went to work for a company in Greenville that made industrial bulk containers and plastic drums.

That company grew as well and was sold to a German global company.

The Leap

Meanwhile, Gentry said she had become friends with an operations manager for a staffing firm who had called on her often trying to get business.

"We used to meet for lunch. She said, 'We just don't get good quality people,'" Gentry said.

That clicked with Gentry who met the owner of the chemical start-up she had worked for. He offered to lease her space to begin CRS.

"I said, 'OK let's do it. Literally, it was that quick,'" she said.

CRS is Gentry's first foray as an entrepreneur, though she and her husband, along with another couple own small rental properties.

She said her leap into a business owner is not something she'd consider typical of a CPA.

"We're very conservative. We analyze everything to death sometimes and don't take a lot of big risks," she said. "For me to say, 'OK. Let's do this' is kind of funny."

But, Gentry said, she gotten a lot of good experience helping to grow other companies, had been in public accounting and worked with a lot of clients that had businesses they were starting and growing.

"It's kind of the same concepts," she said. "What you provide is different but the concepts are all the same, whether you're making something or supplying people."

Gentry hasn't looked back since becoming her own boss. She said it's been fun despite the challenges.

The biggest challenge, thus far, has been setting up the infrastructure. Unlike many franchised staffing firms, CRS didn't come with policies or employee handbooks.

"We had to set all that up ourselves and then just finding good people to work for me internally and finding good people for our clients," she said.

Making the decisions

Having been in the Greenville-Spartanburg area for 15 to 20 years, she knew a lot of people. She started calling them.

CRS now has an office in Charlotte. Gentry hopes to someday open one in Florida as well.

"We've been around. We've proven we can build good references," she said. "We've done small accounts to big accounts."

She believes the firm has been successful because she stays involved in it. She also believes customer service is key.

"We try to respond to our customers as quickly as we can," she said.

One thing that makes her recruiters happy is when a client gets hired permanently by the company they've been placed with.

"Most take our people direct. It's like to a temp-to-perm situation as opposed to straight temporary," Gentry said. "They'll call the recruiter and say, 'I just want to thank you.' That is like the best thing."

Gentry, who loves horses, the Carolina Panthers, and spending time with her grandchildren, also enjoys being her own boss.

It enables her to be the one making the decisions, she said.

'Not for the faint of heart'

Being my own boss is just being able to make the decisions.

But, she said, being an entrepreneur is "not for the faint of heart. It's a lot of stress."

For others considering becoming an entrepreneur, she recommends that they have good advisers, a good attorney, good insurance, and a "trusted network."

"If you're an entrepreneur, it's kind of lonely," she said.

One thing that's helping her in that aspect is being able to mentor someone like Lee.

"She's going to be a great CEO one day. I'm teaching her every facet of the business and that has helped me a lot," Gentry said.

"I was with a small start up, running to get nails at the hardware store, doing this and doing that. My first desk was a plank with two plastic drums under it until we bought the furniture

"Then we grew to where we had this beautiful showplace with customers from around the world coming to visit so I kind of got to see the big company and the small company. I try to incorporate the best of both because there's good and bad about both."

Making an impact

Helping people and making an impact are among the good things Evette has found through QBS.

"What we do is always so rewarding. We have a client with 50,000 employees and then we have clients with 10 employees," she said. "You kind of feel like you're really making an impact no matter what the size of the business because you're bringing them quality technology and we're really helping them."

Like Gentry, Evette used her accounting degree to work in public accounting, worked as a controller and as a CFO in the Professional Employer Organization and Administrative Service Organization space, she said.

"It was like being in public accounting You have a lot of clients and different things and you really feel like you're helping, giving them something they're using every day," she said.

It was while working as a consultant that Evette, a native of Ohio, decided she wanted to open her own company.

She met her husband, David, in the industry.

"It was a good marriage for us and at work, because when I started the business my background was tax, payroll, and the systems, and he was on the sales, HR side and benefits side," she said. "It was a real good marriage all the way around."

Evette started QBS in Ohio. When she got married, the plan had been to operate a company in Greenville as well and "try to meet our growth in the middle," she said.

"We started growing so fast down in Greenville that all of our concentration was down here," said Evette, whose husband is a Greenville native.

We kind of grew in the Southeast sector initially and morphed as we've grown and gotten bigger," she said.

Growth

QBS operates in 48 states. Its base is on a horse farm in Travelers Rest, on property owned by David's grandparents.

"I think the difference with being an accountant and a business owner is you really look at business differently. I have a lot of friends who start out in sales and become an entrepreneur and they're all about the big office space, the cool reception area,

"When you're an accountant, you need functionality. We are a functioning company. Clients don't usually come to us. We go to our clients. We're a processing house. We have a lot of security," she said.

Not many people get past the reception area because of what QBS does, Evette said.

"We house a lot of data so we grew very carefully and very purposefully. It's just worked out so well for us."

She said the core of QBS is customer service.

"It's what separates us from our competition, making sure that our clients feel like they're dealing with people," Evette said. "I think that's a huge part of our success of what we've done here."

Something more

Evette has been in South Carolina for 12 years who and loves it.

Even though her start was as an accountant, she knew in her heart she wanted to do more.

"Being an entrepreneur, you have a spirit of you're never really quite settled," she said. "When everything is too easy, you're not quite happy. You're always kind of looking around like something is missing what should I be doing, is this really what I should be doing, at least that's how I felt."

"I kind of knew I was going to need more. Sometimes you just have to jump off the cliff. You can't look down. You just have to jump and it will work out somehow."

Her father has always been "a huge role model" for her taking the jump, she said. He and his family came to the US from Poland.

He was a tool and dye maker who'd always wanted to have his own shop. But he was a "first-generation guy."

"You were afraid, you had a good job, you had insurance and in his mind, you didn't quit a good job to risk it to start your own business that may fail so I always saw that in him," she said.

"He just couldn't get past the fear of not being able to provide for his family and follow his dream," she said.

But, he encouraged Evette and her three older brothers to not be afraid to follow theirs.

"He was so warm and he cared about people, about integrity and that's always been a big thing for me," she said. "If you don't have integrity you don't have anything so we have always tried to run Quality."

Sacrifices

Evette was a single mom of two who had gone through a divorce and was working three jobs when she started QBS.

The biggest sacrifice made, she said, was just time "but the good part about that which I think was a bonus when people talk about becoming an entrepreneur is I did a lot of my stuff at night."

"I could schedule myself to bake cupcakes and be Amanda's room mom. I could take Joey to pre-school, get home and work for a few hours, make calls go pick him up, get him home and get him lunch' and then my mom would come over," she said.

"I would make some more calls while he was playing before Amanda got home and then I could eat dinner with them, give them a bath, get them in bed and then I would work sometime until 2 in the morning."

"I kind of think a road block shouldn't stop you, it should just make you seek out a different direction. So when people say, 'I don't know if I can do this because I'm a mom, I'm a single mom,' I say you can because you take control of your day"

Evette said her mother also was " huge."

"Early on when I was working a lot, she was always watching the kids and whatever she could do to help, she was there," she said.

Her advice to other aspiring entrepreneurs is to " surround yourself with people who want you succeed and with people you trust. I think that really helps people going forward."

Her own boss

Evette was probably in her 30s when she decided to become her own boss.

"You always have a little bit of hesitation. You go 'Wow. That's a lot' And you risk a lot," she said. "You also have the other side where I'm controlling what I do so I can make it this way or I can make it that way, take bites, but don't take off more than you can chew and that's how I did it."

Evette hopes that someday her children, ages 21, 18 and 10, will take the helm of her company and keep it going.

But she has no regrets about the leap into entrepreneurship.

"I've made mistakes but they've always been such great learning things. It's like I'm smarter today than I was yesterday from it so let's move on. I've been very fortunate that I've never had such a big mistake that has impacted us to where we couldn't move on."

Evette said she also doesn't feel that anyone has pushed her down and not let her be who she is.

"I have three older brothers. They beat me up and put me through so much growing up, that you've got to be one heck of a somebody to make scared or cry at home."

The message she wants to share with aspiring business owners is that nothing can stop you. You can only stop yourself.

"Feel empowered to do what you want, set your sights on it, and jump," she said.

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