

She's made it big in a man's world

C. STUMPO DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION IS ONE OF THE AREA'S LARGEST CONTRACTORS



By Shera Sage Smith

CINDY STUMPO IS AN ATTRACTIVE, 42 YEAR-OLD ENTREPRENEUR, WIFE AND MOTHER who has made it big in a man's world. As president of C. Stumpo Development Corporation, she has been constructing houses for 18 years and has become the largest contractor and residential builder in both Brookline and Newton. This year alone, the suite of companies she heads will be grossing approximately \$30 million.

Stumpo finds herself in an elite class—one out of 50 women-owned businesses to have reached this level of success in Massachusetts. According to Ginny Wilmerding's book *Smart Women and Small Business*, "only two percent of the independent businesses in the country owned by women gross more than a million [dollars] in annual revenue."

In her choice of a career path, she has been self-consciously feminist: "I always wanted to stay ahead of the game and do something new and different, and I also wanted to go into a business that didn't have too many women in it. This is my business. This is not my husband's business or my father's business. They had nothing to do with it."

Stumpo started her business in 1989, when she was 24 years old. She explains matter-of-factly, "I have worked all my life, went to Wentworth Institute [of Technology] at night, and decided to become a contractor. You know, school can only teach you just so much, and then you need to get hands-on training. I started remodeling condos, and two years later went

into speculation [built a house and sold it for a profit]." She rode the wave of the real-estate boom of the late 1980s and 1990s, and "got thrown into custom building." She built her first million-dollar home in 1990.

Typically, she builds on a grand scale—sumptuous, premium-priced houses with exquisite details [she believes that details and finer points are more important to women]. At times, however, she has built houses that were so large that many thought they seemed way out of proportion to the plot of land on which they were built, or for their surroundings. Some people described them as "monster homes" because they towered over their neighbors. Stumpo disagrees and asserts that the new developments have increased the value of their neighborhoods. In any event, since then, cities have put limits on the scale of homes that can be built.

For Stumpo, "graduate school" consisted of working alongside men who were twice her age and had been in the building business for 35 years or more, and "probably forgot more than I ever knew." In taking

on the role of apprentice, she explains, "You can't just go out and tell them what to do, so I asked them, 'How are we going to get this to work?' or 'How would you go about solving this problem?' That is how I got the respect of the men. And that is how I learned." Now she acts as foreman on the job as the general contractor. It is physically demanding work; sometimes she wears a hard hat. Often, conditions are uncomfortably cold.

"People say it is a poor economy, but I am as busy as ever." Some might describe her as a workaholic, as she sleeps only six hours a night and is almost always busy. She enjoys the constant challenge.

She describes herself as down-to-earth and ready to become part of a team that does not highlight her role as a woman. "I'm really a jeans and T-shirt kind of gal. I am surrounded with architects, civil engineers and builders." Most important to a project going smoothly is assembling the right people: "I know that one bad apple can destroy the whole bunch. And it takes time to find just the right members of the team; so when someone hires me, they hire my team."

Good relations with people in the vicinity of her projects is another key ingredient: "When I am building a house, I respect the neighbors. We come in there for 11 or 12 months, and so I like to tell them what we are doing. After all, they have to tolerate us." Her goodwill gestures include sending the neighboring households fruit baskets, and plowing them out in the event of a snowstorm. After a year of building, "My clients become very good friends... Sometimes they miss me and decide to build another

house so we can work together again..."

She asserts that there is no such thing as a perfect house or building. "The only thing you can hope to get from your builder is someone who will stand behind the product. It is all about reputation, not perfection... My product speaks for itself."

Stumpo believes that many builders should not be in this business at all. "They know nothing about building, and they think it is just like any other business, but it's not. I feel that the good builders will stay standing and the bad will fold." Stumpo, in contrast, has a folder filled with rave reviews from the people for whom she has worked. "I stand behind all my work... Sometimes they call me if there is a chip in the paint indoors after they have moved their furniture in. I have even been called to change a light bulb! They feel comfortable with me; we have become friends."

Stumpo's father, Robert Leonard, was involved in a variety of businesses while Cindy was growing up in Revere and Chelsea. "When I was 10 years old, I wanted to go out and work with my father with a briefcase in my hand. I didn't want to stay home with my mother and do girl things." She even admits that, "if you came to my home, I wouldn't know how to make a cup of coffee for you. But I do know how to build a house!"

Juggling competing demands is a talent she has used to her advantage: "I've always been good at multitasking, just like my father. He was a tremendous influence on me... I learned the fundamentals of being a successful businesswoman from him."

She describes herself as a strong, fiercely loyal person with high stan-

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dards. Stumpo's upbringing taught her how to balance her personality with those of others. "When I was very young, ... there were kids on every block to play with. Then we moved to West Peabody, and when I was 12 or 13, we moved to Dudley Road in Newton. It was a culture shock for me! There were no kids on the street corners."

In the end, she decided to stay in Newton and Brookline for the sake of being near her two children. In addition, "We always wanted to give back to the community that we live in." Stumpo married at age 20, and her daughter, Samantha, now 20 and a student at Wentworth, was born when she was 23. Her son Chad is 13. When he visits her on a work site, she encourages him to pitch in.

Stumpo is also involved with her children's schools. Samantha was attending the Oak Hill Middle School in April 2001, when the story broke that a bus crash in Canada claimed the lives of four students. Her mother rushed over, ended up working the phones to help coordinate free transportation to and from Canada. Stumpo recalls, "The airports ... needed every single person's name, date of birth and religion for customs." Cindy's husband Joe flew to Canada and back with many of the parents and children. Cindy Stumpo solved a difficult problem when Senator Edward Kennedy called to offer his condolences: Stumpo told him that they had a plane in the air that the Canadian authorities were not allowing to land because six of the passengers were not U.S. citizens. Minutes later, the plane was given clearance.

Stumpo would like to reinforce a lesson to women in her community. In order for there to be more women in her business, "they can't be intimidated ... Put a woman in this business, and she will outshine a man ... I want women—and especially my daughter—to feel this way. Women have a choice in what they want to do. Get an education, find out what you are interested in and do it. You make your own destiny."

Speaking of making your own destiny, after enduring years of New England weather, Stumpo recently took out a builder's license in Florida—just in case she decides on a warmer climate somewhere down the line. ▲