

Women in Business

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CONSTRUCTION

Liz Ellis keeps it 'green' while building her business

SANTA ROSA - As a civil engineer, Liz Ellis takes great pleasure in her company's finished products.

"It's so cool to walk down the street in Fort Bragg and know that our firm did the work," said Ms. Ellis, the founder and president of Green Valley Consulting Engineers. "It's not an one project I take pride in so much as the vast number of projects that we've actually completed."

Ms. Ellis has worked in the industry for 15 years before she founded Green Valley in 1997 with then-partner Tom Havens. After a lean startup year that consisted of two employees and a lot of tuna sandwiches, the firm has grown to 20 people, focusing on civil engineering, land surveying, landscape architecture and construction inspection.

Due to increased business, Green Valley outgrew its existing office space. So last year, Ms. Ellis and her employees moved into their new 6,300-square-foot digs at 335 Tesconi Circle in Santa Rosa.

"It's the American dream," Ms. Ellis said of her decision to start her own company. "To have your own business with control of your financial destiny. We just decided to go for it, and things took off from there."

One of her original goals, she said, was to keep Green Valley small and nimble. Small size, in her mind, equated with low overhead. And low overhead would enable her to take on smaller projects that weren't financially rewarding enough for larger firms. Having carved out this niche in the industry, she guaranteed Green Valley a steady stream of work.

Ms. Ellis further diversified her firm last year when she added landscape architecture to Green Valley's services. She used the example of a new city park to describe what the services entail. Once awarded the contract, Green Valley would design the layout of the paths and play areas, select play equipment, install "hard-scape" features such as benches and do all of the plantings.



Quick to embrace environmentally friendly engineering practices, Green Valley has specialized in upgrading municipal storm drain systems. Ms. Ellis and her engineers are currently working with the city of Santa Rosa to install two large catchment basins underneath the intersection of Santa Rosa Avenue and First Street. The basins will catch debris and runoff containing oil and grease before it makes its way into Santa Rosa creek.

On the private-sector side, Ms. Ellis has done master planning for Jepson Winery in Ukiah, worked as civil engineers for the Valley of the Moon Children's Home and worked on commercial building expansion and parking renovation for the Charles Schulz Foundation in Santa Rosa and a new residential subdivision in Healdsburg for Sonoma Family Homes.

"We're expanding our general services," Ms. Ellis said. "But in terms of future growth, we'd like to grow our firm while keeping our existing clients happy."

Finding the right balance is the tricky part for Ms. Ellis, something that still keeps her on her toes after a decade of self-employment. Focusing too much on one aspect of the business, she said, means neglecting the other, which could lead to financial ruin.

"It seems like your personal life always takes a backseat to the business," Ms. Ellis said. "And when you do take time off, it seems like you're worrying about something in the office. Our industry is 24/7. It's definitely not paper pushing."

A native of Contra Costa County, Ms. Ellis first found work at the age of 12, mowing lawns and trimming hedges throughout the delta region. She developed a great tan and a desire for an indoor job that offered a steady income.

She started out as an intern with the City of Santa Rosa Public Works Department while taking classes at Santa Rosa Junior College. She transferred to San Francisco State University, where she got her degree in civil engineering in 1990. During her senior year she went to work with Santa Rosa's Winzler & Kelly Consulting Engineers before striking off on her own.

It's been a hard career path, though not without rewards, she said.

"You sacrifice a lot as a woman," she said. "The buck always stops at your desk, and how can you balance that with your kindergarten's play?"

The good news is that no jobs in civil engineering, from management down, are closed to women, Ms. Ellis said. And she advises young, female college graduates to get a strong technical base while mastering the skills of written and oral communication.

"If you have communication skills with a technical base, you're set," she says.