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The Woman In The Window

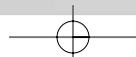
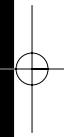
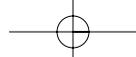
"It is recognition that is long overdue," says Rod Mahler, Manager of Pro-Fit, the manufacturing arm of Meloche Windows and Doors. "She has been here for 35 years but always in the shadow of the company itself. This recognition is long overdue."

Rod is speaking about his boss, the daughter of the company founder, the president of the Meloche Windows and Doors: Elise Clark.

So who is this woman in the shadows of one of the most recognizable names in the window and door business? How did Elsie Clark succeed in a world where men had always ruled?

by D.J. Telfer





The Woman In The Window

It seems an archaic notion to think in terms of gender discrimination here in the 21st century. Words like feminist and male-chauvinist sound so yesterday. But you don't have to look further than current news stories to see that women have not yet reached parity on many levels. Actually it's a long list but one prime example is that there are far fewer women overseeing operations as the chief executive officers in today's business world. Taking this imbalance a step further, it is even rarer to find a woman in charge in a male-dominated industry.

Elise Clark is an exception to the status quo. She has accomplished what few women aspire to achieve - she grew up working in a man's world, she learned, excelled and today, she is in control.

There should be no doubt that Elsie has earned her way to the top. After 35 years in the same business she has had her share of trying times and success. Growing up and working as the owner's daughter has only

meant that she has had to prove herself all the more. Not to mention the whole "man's world thing."

Even as a young child she recalls having to learn how to stand her ground while growing up with four "very competitive" sisters and a brother. "Eat or be eaten," she jokes referring to the sibling rivalries that were part of daily life in the Meloche home. But it was these such rivalries that helped elevate Elise's self-confidence and strengthen her resolve to step from the shadows of a middle child.

"By her early teens she was eager for any opportunity to prove herself"

By her early teens she was eager for any opportunity to prove herself. "I wanted to succeed," she says, "I've always been ambitious ...and I wanted to make money."

The opportunity was right in front of her. She could work for her father.

Meanwhile, Bob Meloche - a hard-working traditional man - might have envisioned his son as the heir to the family business, but in a reversal of traditional roles his daughter Elise was the only one of his six children to show any interest in the business.

She was 13 when she started working on weekends and during the summers. She worked mostly in the front office and it wasn't long before she learned that 'learning on the fly' was a pre-requisite. There would be many times when she had to rely on her own initiative and intuition when it came to completing tasks. "One day Dad came in with a shoe-box full of paper work and gave it to me. 'Here you go,' he said, 'figure it out kid.'" Elise accepted the challenge in stride, besides she knew her father detested administrative work.

"No, Dad did not like office work at all, but I've always had a strong interest in business ...to see how everything develops from innovation to completion, it's something I have always enjoyed." (Elise would go on to earn a business degree from the University of Windsor.)

By her late teens Elise had gained a deeper understanding of the business and became more and more familiar with all aspects and details of windows and doors, with and without

her father's tutoring. By her final year of high school she was quite capable in handling most office matters, as well as, the stream of steady customers.

Learning the business was one thing but facing the blunt look of male chauvinism was something quite different. Elsie recalls one of her first encounters with the 'you-don't-know-anything-you're-a-girl' syndrome. "I was sixteen or seventeen and working in the front office when a middle aged man came up to me and asked, "who's the man in the back who I can speak to for service? "

Elsie stood her ground (she is not one to be intimidated) and calmly explained if he wanted service he would have to talk to her. Which eventually, he did.

"That has been part of the learning curve on both sides." Elsie says. "I had to establish myself in a male dominated industry and they had to accept the reality of working with me. Today, I work with 150 male contractors, I do not see my gender as much of an issue anymore."

Truthfully, Elsie has never had time for narrowminded annoyances. For the past 35 years she has been too busy learning about the construction industry; gaining technical expertise in manufacturing; customer service and quality control all the while addressing the

administrative needs that alone would challenge any CEO .

Reserved and guarded, Elise is very business-like but she is also engaging and personable.

There is a sense that not far beneath the corporate veneer and layers of experience, Elise has a playful spirit and a mischievous sense of humour. She is modest but that does not belie her supreme confidence - there is no questioning that she knows what she is talking about!

It's not ego. There is no pretension in her manner or speech and as Rod Mahler says, "People are always impressed by her thorough knowledge in this industry and I think they are especially impressed with her!"

She is centered and highly imaginative and says her mind is always spinning and spurring her toward new challenges. "Ideas are always percolating and then I am motivated to see if I can put these ideas into action."

Mostly, Elsie has always been driven by a simple straight-forward philosophy, "focus on one thing in particular and see it through to the finish."

She has two proven methods that help her deal with the more stressful times. For one, she says she simply does not worry about things, "you put in the time and effort and everything else will follow."

Secondly, although she admits it took her longer to implement, she does not bring her work home. "For a time I was working seven days a week and then adding more time at home. It was just too much. I realized how important it is to maintain a balance between your career and your personal life, there has to be a clear separation between work and home."

At 48 Elsie is at the top of her game, there's probably no other woman (probably not many men either) who know the window and door business as well as she does, and there is no one more experienced or better qualified to do her job as President of Meloche Windows and Doors.

Today after 35 years Elise has accomplished success in an industry few women would even consider as a career choice. She has stepped out from the shadows of men and from the shadow of her own company. And now, even when the light is upon her she would not seek adulation but those in the industry know the recognition for her accomplishments as a successful business owner and a businesswoman are well deserved and long overdue.

After 35 years she still has the passion and drive but even Elsie has considered her own retirement. "Maybe in about ten years" she says with a smile.

Maybe, but then again Bob (80) still likes to come to work too...and you know what they say: