

Passion for conservation fuels bioengineering company

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Boston Herald

Sunday, October 25, 2009



As Wendi Goldsmith drives to a meeting in Louisiana, she can't help but notice how the road she is on has disturbed the flow of water across the land. She reflects on how it could have been built differently in a way that would have improved the landscape environment.

She feels so passionately about doing things differently that she built a business around the concept. Her firm, Bioengineering Group Inc., combines engineering and conservation services so that projects can be designed from the very early stages to have a beneficial impact on the environment.

Goldsmith believes that it is possible to not only mitigate the potential damage of a large project but to also undo years of damage from other development.

"It doesn't cost any more to do that, it just takes thought earlier in the process," she said.

Goldsmith will be sharing her insights on business as the featured speaker for the fifth annual Million Dollar Women Symposium sponsored by the Enterprise Center at Salem State on Nov. 5. She has much to talk about.

Her company has grown to more than 50 employees from a handful when she started in 1992. Still, it was a tough road of convincing people that she had a good concept and breaking down a bias against women in a male-dominated field while managing the daily logistics of running a company.

The idea of approaching projects from an environmentally friendly perspective has become popular with a growing focus on "green" construction. But it was much different when Goldsmith started. The traditional model, which is still prevalent, is that architects and engineers meet with a client and plan the project and then bring in scientists to help with the permitting.

"What I saw was that there weren't a lot of companies that practiced interdisciplinary work," Goldsmith said. She wanted a company in which everyone involved in a project consulted each other.

In hindsight, she said, she had no idea of what she was getting into as an entrepreneur.

"I didn't even have a good reason to think that people would be willing to pay for it," she said.

At heart, Goldsmith is a conservationist. She considered staying in academia and spending her career spinning out studies but decided instead that she could have a bigger impact by getting involved in real work.

The company grew fairly steadily until shortly after 9/11. At the time, most of the work was coming from the federal government, which severely scaled back projects following the terrorist attacks. Goldsmith faced the unsavory reality of having to lay off nearly half her staff in order to save the company.

The decisions about who had to go were harder than who to hire, she said. Everyone had become like family.

What kept her going then and what drives her now is her passion for what she is doing. That is at the heart of her advice to other entrepreneurs.

"Know what you like, know what your passion is and find a way to do it," she said. "If you're an entrepreneur, you are going to have sleepless nights and gray hair. If you are going to do it well, you have to really love it."