

BUSINESS Women 2023 AWARDS

TRACEY BECK The Beck Cos. chief operating officer ACHIEVEMENT HONOREE



DYNAMIC LEADER: Tracey Beck, left, co-owner and chief operating officer of The Beck Cos. in North Smithfield, speaks with cabinet assembler Ruth Gomez.
PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

Entrepreneurial path wasn't part of her plan

BY SARAH FRANCIS | Contributing Writer

KIDS

can be a tough crowd to impress, especially when it comes to their parents. Consider this example, courtesy of Tracey Beck who ventured into a Dunkin' at Boston Logan International Airport with her teenagers a few years ago.

"I said, isn't this cool! We manufactured the millwork, the metal, the countertops. The response I got was priceless," Beck said.

"Does this mean we get free doughnuts?"

"Sadly, no."

"And that," Beck recalled, "was the end of that!"

Along with her brother-in-law, Ken Beck, and

husband, Brian, Beck runs

The Beck Cos., a group of related businesses that make a range of complementary products. **KB Surfaces** does stonework. **Atlas Fabrication** handles engineered counters. **CAS America** produces commercial shelving. **Dark Horse** manufactures custom metal work, such as steel counters. **Closettec** creates storage cabinets. **Great American** builds pool, air hockey and foosball tables.

Clients are both retail and commercial, including Starbucks, Hilton and Patriot Place. The roughly 80 employees do everything from customer service and design to engineering, skilled carpentry and cabinet installation. Tracey Beck, who serves as chief operating officer, oversees design work and general daily operations; Brian Beck is the chief financial officer; and Ken Beck is the company's engineer. Everything's manufactured at the company's 80,000-square-foot North Smithfield facility.

"With this big-picture approach, there's a lot of growth potential," said designer Mike Ampuja. "It leads to the next creative idea."

Beck didn't think she'd follow an entrepreneurial path. She studied marketing and fashion merchandising at Southern New Hampshire College, graduating with a bachelor's degree in business. Along the way, she discovered she had a penchant for selling and customer service. She was in sales at a travel agency, a furniture rental company and phone company MCI before paus-

ing to stay home and raise her kids.

'Each of my businesses has a spot dear to my heart.'

The creative, entrepreneurial itch was still there, which she realized during a fateful conversation she had almost two decades ago.

"I was having dinner with my mother-in-law. I was in my early 30s and she was very into aesthetics," Beck said. "It was around the time Botox and Restylane were coming into use, particularly in California. She wanted to bring these services to Rhode Island and offer them at a med spa, with gorgeous surroundings but observing the medical side."

The facility Beck launched as a result lasted five years, closing in 2007.

That same year, Beck and her husband bought a bankrupt stone fabrication company and relaunched it as KB Surfaces. The Becks gradually acquired the five additional businesses. Most customers are word-of-mouth and many need cabinets, closets, even table games. The breadth of Beck products means they can buy across all the companies, an advantage over competitors, Ampuja points out.

Like many small-business owners, Beck doesn't work a 9-to-5 schedule. It's just as likely to be a text at 5 a.m. telling her that a truck has broken down, or another text an hour later that a big commercial client wants to come in that day. She's also on call on weekends.

"I'm very accessible," Beck said.

And like many small businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic had a serious impact on The Beck Cos., with labor shortages, long material lead times and freight cost increases.

"We had to adapt," Beck said. "Our gaming division was the most critically affected since our games have commercial applications like bars, colleges, cruise ships and army bases. But we were fortunate, and our employees wanted to stay working throughout COVID. We switched gears and started making disposable face masks for medical professionals and later commercial sneeze guards to help bars, offices and restaurants open back up."

And while the company has grown some 40% from pre-pandemic levels, the pandemic after-effects linger in the availability of materials. Skilled labor is also hard to find, Beck adds.

Since last April, Beck and Ampuja have been spending time at a new Closettec showroom in Reading, Mass., an emporium of all things storage related. Think walk-in closets, Murphy beds, custom bookcases, home office cabinetry, a mudroom, even an innovative laundry room featuring a pet station.

And unlike the appointment-only Rhode Island facility, it is open for conventional retail hours.

"Each of my businesses has a spot dear to my heart," Beck said, "but I love the challenge of optimizing closet spaces to make them functional and beautiful, and I love seeing the excitement on people's faces when they tour the new showroom."

And what's equally fun, she says, is when she and her family are eating at a restaurant or going to a bank where CAS built the case work and Dark Horse did the metalwork.

"We went to the Winter Classic in Boston, and they were playing on our ice hockey table in front of Fenway Park on live TV," she said. "Seeing the company eagle logo in the corners of the game tables in a bar, it's always a rush." ■