

The Stories of Denise Dahms and Wilma Dourney

Remembering two female business owners who left their mark on the door industry

By Vicki Jones, Editor

Last year, our industry lost two trailblazing leaders who dedicated their careers to door manufacturing. On Aug. 19, 2023, Denise Carol Dahms passed away. She had worked for Delden Manufacturing (and Renner Garage Door) for 42 years and had served as president of Delden for the past 30 years.

On Aug. 30, 2023, Wilma McGrady Dourney, CEO of ArmRLite Overhead Doors, also passed away. She had worked at ArmRLite since 1987 and had served as CEO until her passing.

Both Dahms and Dourney assumed their leadership roles during a time when there were very few female-led door manufacturing companies. Both women led family-owned and operated companies. And both had big shoes to fill, succeeding two groundbreaking industry icons (Gene Renner and John J. ["Jack"] Dourney Jr., respectively).

Despite the formidable task of living up to their predecessors' achievements and reputations, they rose to the occasion.

D+AS wanted to learn more about their journeys and influence. To gain insight, we pulled information from Delden Garage Doors' excellent tribute, "A legacy of leadership: The enduring impact of Denise Carol Dahms," written by J. Alex Greenwood and published on Jan. 11, 2024.

We also interviewed Wilma's daughter and current ArmRLite president Shannon McGrady to get a greater understanding of Wilma's influence as a leader and mentor. What we discovered is that the two had a great deal in common and that they each made an indelible mark on our industry as well as the people who were fortunate enough to work with them.

DENISE CAROL DAHMS

Denise's background

Denise joined Delden Garage Doors on August 1, 1980. She held multiple sales and managerial positions throughout her tenure before accepting the role of president of Delden and Renner in 2003. She succeeded her father and founder of the company, Elmer Gene ("Gene") Renner.

Gene founded Delden Manufacturing and Renner Garage Door, which became two of the leading companies in the garage door distribution and retail sectors. Throughout his career, Gene established himself as a legend in the garage door industry, leaving Denise a high bar to uphold.

Early on, Denise experienced resistance

from some customers for being a female in a predominantly male industry. "Lumber yards wouldn't give her the time of day. They wouldn't even let her in the door," said her husband Steve Dahms.

She wasn't automatically accepted by all her employees either. When they heard the news, "some people quit," said co-owner and Denise's son William Dahms. "They didn't have faith in her. Then, they realized that she knew what she was talking about."

Taking the bull by the horns

As president, Denise made immediate changes to the internal processes and structure of the company. Her father said, "Move forward with



your plan. Keep your eyes forward instead of always looking back,” and she followed his instructions.

“When she took over, there were literally months when decisions had to be made. After quickly getting a grip on the finances, she established Delden’s reputation as a reliable customer for our vendors,” said co-owner and Denise’s nephew Brad Dodson.

Multiple locations were sold or closed, and any personnel that had issues with the new direction of the company moved on. Joe Shipp, friend and former company controller said, “Gene was a businessman. Denise didn’t start out being a businesswoman.” After years of working in the industry, she earned a reputation as a garage door person.

The company evolves

Denise’s previous garage door experience served as the foundation for her effective leadership skills and allowed her to help drive the company forward. In 2006, she opened the company’s Central Missouri location in Camdenton, Mo.

In 2016, Delden announced an increase of available products and manufacturers. The move provided Delden dealers with additional options for sectional doors, rolling doors, high-performance doors, loading dock equipment, and specialty products.

In 2017, the company announced the expansion of “Your Home Your Design,” a custom collection with Deltrim steel overlay doors — another strategic move by Denise that helped grow the company.

A respected, no-nonsense leader

Employees appreciated her no-nonsense attitude, strong work ethic, and ability to keep calm in difficult situations. “Very rarely did she get frazzled,” said William. When problems occurred, she would just focus on how to fix it. “I worked with Denise for 10-plus years, and what I remember most is how sincere and what a straight shooter she was,” said Blain St. Ama, senior director of sales at Amarr Garage Doors.

She also encouraged independent thinking. “She would ask people what they thought they should do rather than directly telling them what to do,” said William. “She guided us to find our own solutions even if she suspected those solutions might not work, allowing us to learn through failure.”



From left to right: William Dahms, Gene Renner, Denise Dahms, and Brad Dodson.

She was not only tolerant of failure but also supportive and nonjudgmental when employees did fail, said William. Well, as long as they had good intentions behind their actions and learned from their mistakes, he added.

Making the tough decisions

Denise surrounded herself with a hardworking team comprised of good people, said Renner salesperson Brandon Shepherd. She had high expectations and demonstrated fairness when it came to her employees, even if one of them was a family member.

When the economy took a hit, Denise was forced to reduce labor expenses by implementing layoffs. She determined who to cut based on the employee’s level of seniority. Her son William, who had only recently started working for the company, was one of the employees with the least seniority and thus was laid off. When the market picked back up, he was rehired, but the story represents the fairness and equality that Denise endorsed.

Expecting the best

During a particularly tough time in his tenure, Kansas City Branch Manager Clint Wilson recalled Denise telling him to either sink or swim. “She didn’t mince words,” said Wilson. “You knew where you stood with Denise. There was no gray area,” he added. Joe Rethford, Delden vice president of sales, said that he appreciated her directness and loyalty to her team. “She brought the best out of me.”

Many colleagues shared similar sentiments about Denise’s management approach, stressing how they appreciated her hands-off management style and logical approach to problems.



A welcoming company culture

Denise insisted on quality work, professionalism, and treating people right. She set a good example being a present and loyal leader. Dodson said, “Whenever you talked to Denise, you always had her full attention. No matter what she was working on.”

She also established an open-door policy that applied to all her employees. Todd Whitney, purchasing manager, said, “She had more faith in her employees than they had in themselves; it didn’t matter who it was.”

No matter what obstacles the company encountered or that the industry endured, she maintained a culture of hard work and solidarity. “She would just stick her head down and keep on moving.” William said. “Some

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people kind of shut down when stuff like that happens. She just worked harder.”

Industry recognition

Denise was involved with industry associations, including IDA and DASMA. In 2022, she was recognized by the industry with the IDA Heritage Award. However, she told her colleagues that she felt awkward accepting the award, adding that she was too young to receive it. She didn't seek recognition or desire fancy titles. Dodson said, “She didn't like titles because she believed that nobody's job is more important than another's.”

She was an active participant at IDA trade shows and appointed staff for the DASMA Annual and Mid-Year meetings. Joe Hetzel, retired technical director of DASMA, said, “Over the years, she shared many valuable insights about the garage door business that strongly influenced my technical work.”

Continuing the legacy

Gene Renner was an industry legend, and Denise transformed the valuable lessons she learned by watching her father into ways to make the company even more successful. Denise also enhanced the diversification of the business by growing the Renner installation side of the business. “I think Renner really blossomed after she took over,” said Kelly Meyer, regional office manager, who has worked with the company for 31 years.

Denise purchased semitrailers so that the company could start delivering doors to the lumber yards. “I think it was a big deal for the company when she implemented our milk run program,” said Robert Perez, plant manager.

Denise managed to successfully balance her father's vision for the company with her own goals. Rick Vinson, national sales manager at Napoleon/Lynx, said, “I don't think she ever lost sight of Gene's humble beginnings and carried forward his ethics.”

You could always be assured that any negotiations or agreements with her would be honored. She did a great job maintaining Delden's integrity and the high quality of their products.”

Passing the torch

William Dahms and Brad Dodson are currently running the company and will continue to do so moving forward. “We are third-generation owner-operators. This succession plan has been in motion for the last five years. In many ways, most of our adult lives,” said Dodson.

“She has passed the torch ... and I am certain her principles and ethics will be carried forward for many years to come,” added Vinson.

WILMA MCGRADY DOURNEY

Wilma's background

Wilma assumed the role of ArmRLite president when her husband, Jack Dourney, retired in 1991. Jack founded the company in 1958, selling the ArmRLite aluminum and glass sectional door — a welded product distinctly designed different from his competitors' doors. Throughout his 33-year tenure, the company's product line became more diversified and the manufacturing facilities expanded.

During that time, Wilma gained extensive sales, marketing, and management experience from working in the automotive industry. Her daughter, Shannon McGrady, said that her mom held increasingly important administrative positions. When a traveling southeast regional sales manager job became available, she asked if she could apply, and they gave her a chance.

And it was a good thing they did! “Wilma blew the company's sales quota numbers out of the water,” said Shannon. It was rewarding to see her thrive in the new role.

The key to Wilma's early success was her savvy on-the-job training. While working as an assistant, she would read and analyze the documents that came across her desk. That allowed her to gain knowledge about the products, operational processes, and other information, and ultimately gave her an advantage in the sales role.

A natural-born leader

In 1987, Wilma brought her executive experience to ArmRLite when she accepted the position of vice president of sales and marketing management.

A few years later, Jack decided to retire and named Wilma as president of the company. Shannon said that he was incredibly supportive of her mom. “His belief in her ability was the icing on the cake. When the time came for him to retire, he completely trusted his creation in her hands.”

Shannon said that her stepdad's leadership style was different from her mom's but that they understood one core principle — people are the most important part of the company. “My mom was about creating a self-sufficient team, and she was very invested in her employees. She knew everything about every employee and their families as well as our

“ She knew everything about every employee and their families as well as our dealers and their families. ”

dealers and their families. She was like a mom to us all.”

“If any of us get lost, we stop and ask ‘What would she do?’ and we find our way. She was a highly respected and regarded leader among customers, coworkers, and peers,” Shannon added.

“Even though she was somewhat traditional, she also knew how to think outside the box.”

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Wilma adopted a Professional Employee Organization for the company in order to provide staff with Fortune-500-company-level benefits. It was a radical concept at the time, but the program allowed her employees to have incredible HR benefits. Shannon said, "Her goal was to make sure her employees were taken care of."

High expectations

Wilma expected a lot from her employees. However, she practiced what she preached, which was demonstrated by her long hours and dedicated work ethic. Shannon said that her motto was, "Be firm, but fair."

Shannon described her mom's leadership style as warm, caring, and empathetic — yet strong. "She was also an excellent communicator and would regularly acknowledge and compliment her employees. This helped build their confidence and helped grow the company.

"Confidence is such an important driving force in work and in your personal life," said Shannon. "My mom had an ability to foster confidence in people. She would say if you don't believe in yourself, how are going to sell anyone else on your product or company?"

"She saw capability."

When I asked Shannon how her mom felt about being a female leader in a male-dominated industry, she said that "My mom believed her gender was irrelevant to getting the job done." She had the same attitude when hiring employees.

"She would hire the best person for the job. She didn't see gender. She saw capability."

Continuing the legacy

For decades, ArmRLite was recognized for developing cutting-edge and unique products. Under Wilma's leadership, that culture continued. In 1993, the company began to sell aluminum and glass doors for high-end residential use. From 2004-2006, they introduced an aluminum carriage door, the Aluminarc (an aluminum top section that conforms for use with arched headers), and faux wood finishes for all their door models. In 2015, the company launched the industry's only aluminum and glass ADA-compliant door.

Shannon, ArmRLite's current president, said that she continues to keep the legacy of Jack and Wilma alive by maintaining the quality of their products and by continuing to create products that help people.

"ArmRLite has always designed products to keep people safe, and we always will."

Right now, the company is focused on new research and development. "We have a new hurricane-impact product that we are



Passing the torch

As Wilma took on the role of CEO, Shannon transitioned into the position of president of ArmRLite, after serving the company in various roles since 1987. Shannon brought extensive management experience and a business degree from Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn.

She credits her operations background to her education and on-the-job experience working with United Parcel Service (UPS). "Working as a UPS supervisor while taking management courses at school reinforced the same valuable information and allowed me to learn quickly."

Wilma was confident in her daughter's capabilities, and they genuinely respected and enjoyed working with one another. That might explain why Wilma remained so hands-on even when she was most ill. "I would always run things by her," said Shannon. "I wanted her

blessing, but I also valued her perspective."

Shannon feels extremely fortunate to have spent so much time working with and learning from her mom. When I asked if she feels any pressure about continuing her legacy, she said, "My mom and stepdad were not

only smart, but they also used their hearts to lead and grow the company. The lessons that I've learned from them will continue to live on through me."

“She would hire the best person for the job. She didn't see gender. She saw capability.”



excited to offer. The WZ3D has undergone extensive testing and achieved high wind load ratings making it ideal for Florida's new impact-related criteria."

While the company launches new products, they also still take pride in offering their "mainstay products," like the Electra, Titan, and Custom CI doors.

Customer is king

Wilma stressed that business should be relationship-focused, not transaction-focused. As a family-owned and operated business, their philosophy has been to treat their customers like family. "For us, the customer is king. Our vendors are our partners. This means if they need something, we must do everything in our power to help," said Shannon. "If our customers are successful, then we're successful," she added.



Denise Dahms and Wilma Dourney led their companies to higher heights and positively influenced their employees, colleagues, and the industry along the way. If you have a note or story to share about either, please email vicki@vjonesmedia.com. ■