

# August 2003

## Daughters Take Care of Business

### Founding Fathers Are Often Finding The Best Man for Their Job Is a Woman

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Thursday, August 7, 2003; Page PG05

In the midst of his battle with colon cancer, Wendell Harbour held a family meeting last December. Sitting in the Georgetown University Hospital, the 62-year-old government contractor asked his oldest daughter, Lisa Harbour-Carter, to take over his Northern Virginia information technology company.

"I said, 'Dad, I'll do the best that I can,' " recalled Harbour-Carter, who was a stay-at-home mother in Mitchellville when her father became ill.

Ten days after she made the promise, he died.

Harbour-Carter gave herself two months to grieve, then, in February, took the helm of her father's business, Wynnewood Technologies Inc. Harbour founded his small but profitable company in 1993 and operated it as an information technology contractor to federal agencies. He was a veteran of that insular world, having worked in a U.S. Department of Transportation office that assisted minority businesses.

Harbour grew the company from only a few employees to a dozen and won an ongoing contract working on technology issues for the Department of Energy's mailroom. Last year the company posted revenue of \$1.8 million.

"He really set a strong foundation," Harbour-Carter said. She has, she says, big shoes to fill. Harbour-Carter, 40, is one of many children worldwide stepping into their parents' shoes. As one of the 24 million family-business owners in the U.S., she is participating in what has become an age-old ritual at the center of every family business -- a symbolic passing of the torch.

Prince George's, home to a large number of small federal contractors, is currently the site of at least two such transitions. In both cases, daughters are taking over companies that their fathers founded. Once extremely rare, such changeovers from father to daughter are becoming increasingly common, according to a 2002 survey of 38,000 family businesses conducted by the Springfield, Mass.-based MassMutual Financial Group and the Alfred, N.Y.-based Raymond Family Business Institute. About 34 percent of the business owners surveyed said the next person in line to lead their company is female.

Over the years, Harbour-Carter said, she and her father had talked about his hope that she would one day succeed him as president of Wynnewood, which manages computer facilities and software for its clients. (She has no brothers and her sister Wenda Tate runs a children's camp in Montgomery County.) They planned for a smooth turnover, one where father would show daughter the ropes and stand by to guide her.

"He would have coached me," Harbour-Carter said. "I expected to take over the company gradually."

Instead, Harbour-Carter, who received a marketing degree from Hampton University in Hampton, Va., is charting her own course. To do that, she is drawing upon the consulting work she had done for her father's company over the years and a decade of experience in information technology at MCI.

She left the large telecommunications company in 2001 and bought a franchise license to operate an educational children's dance business called Kinderdance. She sold her franchise last April while pregnant with her third son.

Her father became ill during that time. Harbour-Carter spent time with him in the hospital and held his hand while she and other members of her family comforted him during his chemotherapy treatments.

In the seven months that she has been leading Wynnewood, Harbour-Carter has taken what her father created and has begun making the business her own. Part of that was a decision she made recently to move Wynnewood from Arlington to the Treetops Building in Landover, which is closer to her home.

Her primary strategy for growing the business is building relationships with larger federal government contractors and winning lucrative subcontracting deals. To do that, she is relying on business relationships built by her father and meeting with Prince George's business leaders to try to break into local and state government business.

"If I can get a little bit of business here and a little bit of business there," she said, "it all adds up."

One company Harbour-Carter plans to partner with is Largo-based ABSS, a privately held information technology company founded by Theodore Howard in 1972. Today, Howard's daughter Naomi is steering the company, which graduated in 1985 from the federal government's Small Business Administration 8(a) Business Development program, which awards contracts to small, minority-owned companies, and has grown to 150 employees.

When Harbour-Carter and Naomi Howard met last month, they found they had a lot in common as daughters running businesses built by their fathers. Naomi, 37, also had charted a career independent of her father's company.

Until she took a position as her father's special assistant three years ago, Howard had never worked for ABSS. She had, however, worked in the information technology industry and spent five years building an Internet network for Anne Arundel County's court system.

It was after she came to ABSS -- which develops software, conducts computer training and maintains computers systems for its clients -- that Naomi realized how much her father wanted to retire from the taxing job of running the \$17 million company.

"My father has worked extremely hard over the years," she said. "I could definitely see that he was tired and wanted to cut back. I wanted to help him do that."

Last year, Naomi ascended to the position of president. Theodore C. Howard, 66, still has the title of chief executive but will retire from day-to-day operations at the end of September. He said he always hoped one of his three children would lead the company. For a time, he assumed his son Theodore A. Howard, 35, would take on the responsibility.

"I always envisioned, as an old chauvinist male, that my son would take over," Theodore said, laughing heartily.

"My brother and I have a running joke," Naomi adds. "Sometimes we argue: 'You run the company.' 'No, you run the company.' "

Naomi's brother became a music producer. Her sister, Jeanette, started the company's Atlanta office and still consults with ABSS. Initially, as a young black woman, she had a hard time getting ABSS employees and business partners to respect her, her father Theodore said.

"She had somewhat of a difficult time," he said, "but I let them know she was in charge. That was key, to make sure I introduced her around and acting as a mentor to her."

Her brother, Theodore, said their father is loosening his ties to the company. One sure sign, he said, is that Naomi "does the Monday meetings, and he's not there."

That kind of unity with and support from her father has been vital to her success, Naomi said. She is now mapping out a plan to increase the company's revenues to \$50 million by 2008. She plans to broaden the company's customer base from solely local and state contracts to federal government and private sector work and building the company's staff by hiring handpicked executives to help her lead the company.

She is also networking with colleagues from her father's generation and some closer to her age, such as Eric Campbell, vice president of Century Technologies in Silver Spring, which his father, Donald, founded.

"It's just natural for folks to gravitate toward other folks in a similar position," Campbell said of the connection between second-generation family business owners. "We understand the perks and the challenges of working in a family-owned business and the pressures of it being a family firm and you being the next in line, potentially."

Campbell and his wife, Candace, started a loose network of second-generation business owners throughout the Washington area three or four years ago and began holding networking and social meetings to promote business deals.

It is a set that Harbour-Carter said she is happy to join. She said her own passion for her father's company is helping her balance her dual roles as a mother and company president.

"It has got a lot more energy than I expected," Harbour-Carter said of the business. "Things change quickly. Everything is built around the government and the military. You're always sitting on the edge of your seat saying, 'Did we get [the contract]?' "

Harbour-Carter's foremost goal for Wynnewood is to wean the company from its Small Business Administration 8(a) Business Development contracts. In four years, the company will graduate and no longer be eligible to apply for the set-aside contracts. Continuing the relationships her father had with other veteran federal contractors, such as Gloria Redman, president of Triumph Technologies, an information technology company in Falls Church, will be key, she said.

"The working relationship has been very smooth," said Redman, who worked with Harbour-Carter's father for years and plans to continue working with Wynnewood. "She jumped in as someone who didn't know how to swim and started swimming. . . . I think wherever he is, her father is very proud of her."