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Former welfare recipient's rise from housecleaner to Philly 100

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ARDMORE -- The janitorial company Team Clean Inc. grew out of the founder's will to survive rather than a lifelong passion.

"I didn't have an idea for Team Clean," recalled Donna Allie, Team Clean president. "It was back up against the wall time."

In fact, before Allie incorporated her company in 1989 using the \$1,000 she transferred from her smaller cleaning operation, she was so embarrassed about her one-woman cleaning operation that she preferred to tell friends that she was unemployed.

But Allie's attitude has changed to one of pride. Over the years she has grown her company from a residential home cleaning service into a commercial cleaning company that last year employed 260 people, 75 of which are full-time, and enjoyed gross sales of \$3.7 million. Team Clean also experienced 106 percent growth in the past two years with the help of large cleaning contracts with Veterans Stadium, the Naval Air Warfare Center in Warminster and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"I'm not embarrassed anymore," said Allie, 51. "I wear it proudly now and I make sure I tell them what our gross sales are."

Although growth has been strong for the company over the past two years, the Bryn Mawr native has been plying the cleaning trade for more than a decade.

After graduating from Wilburforce College of Ohio in 1980 with a degree in sociology and vocational rehab, she had hoped to get a job that would enable her to help people. But instead she found all the jobs she sought in the vocational field demanded further education and she was barely able to support herself as the single parent of a young daughter.

Allie, who was then on public assistance, began cleaning houses along the Main Line. Soon she found more clients than she could assist herself. To meet their needs she began collecting names of people from her neighborhood and friends to offer those she couldn't work for herself.

In 1985, she took the important step of accepting a commercial contract. A man at her church suggested that the Upper Main Line YMCA might need a new contract so she took his advice and went after it.

"Switching to commercial cleaning was important in order to get to the level of profit and sales I'm at now," Allie said. "Can you imagine how many houses it would take at \$55 to \$75 a house to get there?"

Another boost to the company's bottom line was the fact that Team Clean ultimately was certified as a minority- and female-owned business eligible for city work which has been Team Clean's entree to high-profile contracts.

That certification helped when Allie got an important phone call in 1987 from a man named Roland Hayden at a Baltimore company named Harry M. Stevens, which has since been acquired by Aramark Corp. He told her he had won the contract to clean the Vet but needed minority participation. She made her way down to the stadium and assured him that she could manage a team of 50 workers every night.

While she needed no start-up money when she first started cleaning houses because she used the supplies she found in the home, she suddenly did not even know how she would manage to meet the demands of such a large payroll and could find no bank that would assist her. Finally the contractor agreed to help her and she successfully took on the gargantuan task of cleaning up the Vet as well as other entertainment facilities. More recently, she said Royal Bank of Pennsylvania has provided financing to Team Clean.

Allie now believes her biggest challenge is handling the growth that she'd never anticipated. She is in the process of rebidding on many of the 3-year-long public contracts that are now expiring and looking to the defense industry to add to the client roster.

Over the years she has also learned one important thing about stadium cleaning that may be disheartening to short-cutters: The only way to get a place spick-and-span despite inventive modern machinery is by hand.