

Like father, like daughter— success stays in the family



NANSEE LANNING

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BURBANK — Nansee Dorfman Lanning wasn't exactly raised to take over the family business, but that's exactly what happened.

Since 1981 the petite, blond, blue-eyed Lanning has been chief operating officer and vice president of B & J Metals, an aluminum distributorship founded by her late father Jules some 17 years ago.

The firm caters primarily to the aerospace industry, Nansee says, carrying a stock of aluminum that ranges in size from foil thin sheets to sections six inches deep.

To hear the 35-year-old Nansee tell it, she fell into the business, starting as a secretary/file clerk while still a teenager.

"I was probably a confused kid, but I was lucky enough to have a family who made a place for me," she said.

Once in the business Nansee found it interesting and discovered in her father a role model. Today she looks back and realizes that she was enthralled by the competition, success and achievement she was fortunate enough to experience.

"For my emotional makeup, it was the best alternative to sitting home and having babies," she said.

Actually her parents had planned a more traditional way of keeping the business in the family and selected Nansee's older brother Barry as the one who would take charge. But the near drowning of his infant

daughter two years ago and her resulting handicap makes it impossible for him to put in the extensive hours required as a company chief.

As one of only a few women holding administrative posts in her field, Nansee says she has been faced with sexual discrimination, both from male clients and peers in her field. In some cases a potential customer will insist on speaking with her brother.

When she sets them straight, Nansee said, "I can always tell the surprise." Usually such situations end happily, with Nansee gaining the respect and admiration of those who had earlier expressed reservations.

Her brother does work with the company. He's a vice president in charge of plant operations. Nansee's mother, Rose Dorfman, holds the title of president and works in the office, as she has since the company was founded.

"They walk around and salute me," Rose said with a laugh, quickly adding, "I run the (billing) machine. Nansee runs the business."

The current operation resembles little the company's early days when, Rose said, she would be left to answer the phone at the firm's original location, 2907 N. San Fernando Blvd., while her husband and son would make deliveries.

"I'd take in my ironing board and do my ironing while the phone rang," Rose said. "I took my sewing in too." Gradually, however, the volume of customers increased and, Rose said, "I wasn't able to do that anymore."

Eventually there was so much business that the office was moved to its present site about 10 years ago. When Dorfman died in 1981, the company was grossing \$10 million annually. It's stayed about the same under Nansee's direction.

Earlier this year Nansee used her skills as a salesperson to negotiate a \$460,000 contract with McDonnell-Douglas. She's got a mounted newspaper account of that deal, one of the largest in the firm's history, and proudly shows it to a visitor.

Her mother, too, obviously is proud of that accomplishment. "She maneuvered the whole deal herself," Rose said.

"I like achieving. I like winning," Nansee explained.

The firm continues to grow, so much, in fact, that the current site with its three buildings and 30,000 square feet is no longer large enough to accommodate the business and its 35 employees. A \$5 million move to a new 67,000 square foot building in Sun Valley is in the works. The company is expected to be moved by April, but the family isn't necessarily looking forward to leaving this community.

"We like Burbank," Nansee said. "It's central, it's clean, it's a good community." But the firm was frustrated in efforts to find a suitable location to fit expansion plans.

Whatever the future holds for B & J Metals, there's one thing certain — how Dorfman would feel about the company's progress.

"He'd be proud, very proud," Nansee said.