

# Leaving a legacy

**W**hen you start a business by borrowing money from your family, it becomes a personal venture from day one, and that is certainly the case for Davis Imperial Cleaners of Chicago, IL.

The drycleaning company was launched in 1956 by Leona and Bernie Davis, who also happened to be the only original staff. The start-up funds were provided via a \$500 loan from Leona's father.

On paper, it probably wasn't the best idea since there were seven cleaners — including two national chains — within two blocks of the small business. However, that did not deter the Davises from dreaming big.

Before they had even opened, they knew they wanted to leave behind a legacy. They wanted to be known one day as the finest drycleaning establishment in the Windy City. It was a lofty goal, but one the couple felt quite passionate about.

Over 50 years later, Davis Imperial is now owned by the Davises' daughter, Lynda, and her husband, Rick. The Woods are every bit as passionate as the generation that preceded them, especially when they talk about the company's history.

"My mom handled everything on the inside," Lynda explained. "She did the bagging and the tagging. She was the seamstress, the spotting technician and the presser. She always tells the story of how on the first day she started she thought it'd be a really good idea if she made it look like she was really busy when they opened. What she did was she stuffed and filled the garment bags so that the store would look very busy and full. There were no clothes underneath, but she stuffed them and hung them."

While Leona manned the inside of the plant, Bernie looked for new customers on the outside.

"He bought a station wagon for \$50 from a friend and he actually solicited door to door, asking people to give his company a chance," Lynda said. "He showed them the difference between their quality and service to those of the other neighborhood cleaners."

When he wasn't handling the retail routes, Bernie had a few other jobs under his belt: marketing and public relations, as well as bookkeeping and accounting.

"My dad had a simple philosophy when it came to accounting: if you had more at the end of the day than you paid out, then it was a really good day," Lynda said.

**L**ong before Rick Wood married Lynda and worked at Davis Imperial, his own father and uncle ran a drycleaning business for a few years in a small town in downstate Illinois. However, it was journalism, not drycleaning, that occupied most of the elder Woods' life.

"My father was in the journalism business for about 40 years," Rick recalled. "He worked for a weekly newspaper. He ran a machine called the Linotype. It was like a typewriter but it printed out hard lead."

After Rick graduated from high school, he enrolled in Southern Illinois

University where he studied journalism. There, Lynda was majoring in communications.

Initially, the married couple entered the teaching profession. Lynda taught communications for a brief time, but soon switched careers.

She loved retail and was hired as an apparel buyer for the next five years. In her spare time, she also handled marketing and promotions for Imperial Davis from home.

Meanwhile, Rick taught high school for about three years.

"During my first year, I made the princely sum of \$6,300 as a high school

teacher," Rick laughed. "I really enjoyed it. I put forth a great deal of effort, but I wasn't happy. The situation was kind of political."

**T**hat philosophy works both ways, meaning everybody in the plant is treated with respect. They are given high expectations, as well. Case in point: when the Woods' son, Jordan, graduated from college with a business degree, he asked to come aboard. Naturally, they said "no."

the facility shares the same vision. It's a singular passion. We talk about it over and over again. They understand that we expect them to treat our clients in the same way and with the same respect that they would want to be treated."



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## Rick & Lynda Wood

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So, he opted to pursue his Master's degree; however, before the fall semester began, his father-in-law asked him to come work at the family cleaners for the summer. So far, that temporary job has lasted over three decades.

**W**hen the "polyester phase" hit the industry hard in the 1970s, only two cleaners in the Woods' neighborhood survived: the lowest priced one and Davis Imperial, which had always been on the high end of the cleaning scale.

"Only the extremes survived, which is kind of what is happening to the drycleaning industry today," Lynda noted. "A large part of our success is in our technical skills and our ability to successfully process high-end garments and understand the fashion and the nuance, and to be able to return garments in ready-to-wear condition."

"The key is recognizing that market niche that's the high-end person who is really looking for quality and the fact that that person made an investment in their wardrobe, and we feel it's our job to protect that investment," Rick added.

Of course, in order to protect their customers' "investments," Davis Imperial must work hard to keep current with fashion and cleaning trends, which might explain why the company's slogan is: "Perfection is not an accident."

"We spend about 150 hours a year educating people in this facility," Lynda said. "Women's Wear Daily sits on the lunch table, in addition to a myriad of other fashion magazines. Everybody in

"We wanted him to come in on his own free will," Rick explained. "The best way to do that was for him to go through the corporate world first. We actually put a minimum of two years' experience. We said, 'Go work someplace for two years. We don't care where.' He ended up at the publisher R.R. Donnelly." After two years in that company's logistics department, Jordan was undeterred. However, before he could join the family company, he had to meet additional requirements.

"The first requirement was IFI technical training, beginning and advanced," Lynda said. "The second was NCA, practical applications. We didn't want him to come in as the boss's son. We wanted him to have the respect of the people who were here."

**E**ven after Jordan met all of his parents' stipulations, the Woods wanted to make sure that he understood what it meant to perpetuate the family's legacy.

"I like to think we're a company with a whole lot of heart and values," Lynda said. "We never rest on our laurels, never for one second. If people reward us with their business, then they deserve 150 percent of everybody in this facility because they keep us eating. They feed us. I don't ever forget that. I think that's because we know of all the sacrifices that our family has made throughout a lifetime."

"My dad always said to me, 'If you want to be able to sleep well every night, you must conduct your business each day with honesty and integrity. Then, and only then, my child, will you rest peacefully.'"

One way the Woods make sure they live up to the high expectations they have set for themselves is through net-

working. They attribute much of their success to the relationships they've cultivated with industry experts over the years.

"My mom and dad were poor," Lynda explained. "They started out with nothing. Their mindset during those years was that you didn't share with your competition. They didn't have the luxury that Rick and I have — and Jordan, too — to get on an airplane and to be able to share and interact with people who are not only in the same industry, but in the same market niche."

About five years ago, the couple was invited to be guests of a Methods for

Management group. The experience really opened their eyes.

"We just observed them for the first 20 minutes, and each person introduced themselves and their company and background," Lynda recalled. "I can remember feeling as if I had come home. It was the first time I sat around the table with people who truly understood who we were, what we experienced in a day, and understood our market. I felt safe to share."

**T**hat group of cleaners later became Leading Cleaners International, one of many invaluable connections the Woods have secured.

Another occurred when *Vogue* magazine labeled them as a "Fashion Mechanic." They were the only such cleaner recognized in all of Chicago.

The Woods also worked hard to meet the rigorous requirements to be a Five-Star Certified Couture Cleaner.

"We were put through a stringent battery of tests, from a physical inspection to you-name-it, to make sure we were equal to the title," Lynda said.

Davis Imperial has also participated in IFI's Award of Excellence program for the past two years.

All the awards may sound impressive, but the Woods are more concerned about producing excellent work. That is why they believe the industry's trade associations are an excellent tool at their disposal.

"There are so many people who pay the dues and never pick up the phone," Lynda said.

"We certainly aren't sitting here on a pedestal because we were guilty of the same thing when we started — until it all of a sudden dawned on us that we had this resource that we weren't using."