

Sylvia Hampel

President and CEO, Clearview Cleaning

Sylvia Hampel's entrepreneurial spirit kicked in at the tender age of nine, when her parents told her she had to make her own money to buy clothes, shoes — even toiletries.

Today, she's president and CEO of Boise, Idaho-based Clearview Cleaning, the largest woman-owned business in the state. Established in 1995 as a one-woman operation, Hampel's company employs nearly 500 people and has expanded into Washington, Oregon and Utah. Its commercial cleaning business focuses on green cleaning products and techniques, and lists clients in health care, government agencies, nonprofits, education, finance and other industries.

Starting Out

"I think I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit and attitude," she says. "My dad was a cabinet maker and he built beautiful things. He worked for the same company his whole career, even though friends would want him to build them bars or bedroom furniture after they'd seen his work. I remember saying to him, when I was eight or nine, that he should go into business for himself. But he'd shoot the idea down."

For Hampel, there wasn't much of a choice as far as going into business for herself went. "I had to start supporting myself at such a young age. I started babysitting and then I added house cleaning so I could make more money," she says. "I worked full-time during the summers. I started adding more and more things. I remember pick-

ing up trash for \$2.25 per hour at a drive-in movie theater when I was 10 years old. For me, everything started at such a young age, it was really about survival."

She offers the example of Canadian businessman, author and television personality Kevin O'Leary, who said his mom cut him off the second he graduated college, and attributes

some of his success to that moment. He said he did the same for his kids. "Every parent," said O'Leary, "should cut their kids off."

It would solve half the world's problems. Suddenly, they're like, 'Oh crap, who's going to pay my rent? Where am I going to get food?' So they have to work."

Hampel agrees. "I think that when you don't [cut them off], it breeds the attitude of, 'Mom and dad will be there and they'll take care of this.' O'Leary said it doesn't mean you wouldn't be there to help when something went wrong or there was a tragedy, but what better way is there to start having to survive and fend for yourself and to make things happen?"

"For me, it was about survival.

There was no one to fall back on, not my parents or friends. I had to make money," she adds.

Raising a Family

Having to support herself at age nine wasn't Hampel's only challenge. "I was pregnant at 15 with my daughter [Jessica, 36]," she says. "I was single with her for 12 years before I got married, and I think it was tough on her."

While raising her daughter as a single mother, Hampel finished high school and completed a college degree in business and aviation management at Westminster College in Utah (she also studied public

administration at Idaho State University). She began a career as an air traffic controller prior to meeting her husband.

I got married at 28 and didn't have Parker [her oldest son, now 23] until I was 30." Two years later, she began fostering her youngest son, Travis [21], whom she eventually adopted. But shortly after she began fostering him, her marriage ended in divorce. "I had nothing," she says. "I was broke. I had the house and the Suburban, two little boys, and Jess was leaving for college. We had no money again, no child support. Those times were really tough. And while I tried to make life fun, I spent a lot of time working."

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Transitioning back into the workforce after being a stay-at-home mom — with two young sons to look after and a daughter in college — meant reaching back to her roots in cleaning, which offered flexibility as far as being able to spend as much time with her children as possible, but wasn't bringing in enough money. "I went to real estate school right after I got divorced to supplement my income." After two weeks of school, she began selling houses. "I became one of the top producing agents for John L. Scott, two years running. And I loved it," she says. "But I look back now and wonder how I did it. How do you take care of your kids and keep up with all their activities and events while cleaning and selling real estate? And Travis was special needs, so we had speech and fine motor skill therapy; we spent hours in doctors' offices. I had to fight for him in school because they wanted to put him in a special needs class and I wouldn't let them. His first grade teacher said he'd never read. But the kid's phenomenal."

Challenges as a Woman

Hampel didn't only face multiple challenges in her personal life. The same has been true throughout her career. "When I was an air traffic controller, I was told, 'You better be twice as good or you won't succeed,'" she says. "There were only a handful of women doing that sort of job back then. We were pioneering into the workforce. And I believed it to be true, that I did have to work twice as hard to succeed. But today, if someone asked me that, I'd say, 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe you'd say that!'"

"Even in the commercial cleaning industry, I was told from the get-go that it's a 'good old boys' club. And I've had to maneuver my way around that. But that's one thing I feel I've done really well. I've proven myself as a business

leader. I've always taken what I've done very seriously and I think that's earned me a lot of respect from the community.

"For a long time, I was looked at as just a cleaning lady. People would say, 'Oh, that's cute. You're a cleaning lady!' I mean really, that was the attitude back then. And, even now, a lot of times when they ask what I do and I tell them I have a commercial cleaning company, it doesn't register. They think I clean houses. There's nothing wrong with cleaning houses, but it isn't what I do. So I'll tell them it's a commercial company and that we're in four states, and then they start to get it."

At a recent business conference, another example occurred. "My son [Parker] went with me and we switched seats midway so we could get a chance to talk to other people. And in both seats my son was in, one of the gen-

tle men sitting next to him asked him what my net income was and what my worth was. When we got back to the room, he said he couldn't answer some of the questions that people were asking him. So I asked what they were, and he goes, 'They asked me your net income and the value of the company.' And I thought, 'Wow, I've never ever had the nerve to ask anybody what they make. Why would they feel it was OK to ask my son that about me?'"

Is it because I'm a woman?

Is it because they couldn't quite figure out why I was sitting at their table, or why I was there, or that they've never met a woman this successful?' I thought it was really interesting. I didn't get offended. I don't offend easily. It just is what it is."

Knowing her industry well was how she broke through



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the initial “boys club” barrier. “I always maintain professionalism,” she says. “I didn’t cross that line in any way. And I worked hard. And what’s great now is those same ‘good old boys’ come up to me. They ask me to sit on their boards. Yet at the same time they’ll say things like, ‘Sylvia, I’m so proud of you,’ which is nice, in a sense, but I can’t imagine them ever going up to a man and saying something like that. If a man had started a company and was super successful, you’d just say, ‘Wow, Joe, that’s great! I’m happy for your success! Way to go, man!’ And you’d slap him on the back. But since I’m woman, it’s, ‘Gosh, we’re so proud of you.’”

Yet she still doesn’t take offense. “I’ve known all these guys for years, and I’m really proud of the success we’ve had, and a lot of them are my good friends. I think they mean well, and maybe that 20 years ago, they never thought I’d be where I am today. I call it ‘growing up in this community.’ I think they really are proud.”

Keys to Success

One of the most important keys to being successful as a business leader is the ability to motivate and retain one’s employees. After all, they’re the ones doing the day-to-day work, and often the physical labor. “Our employees are the key to making our company great,” says Hampel. “I think they’re motivated by the fact that I believe leadership trickles down and that they see how hard I work.

“We pay them well but I don’t think motivation is strictly based on money. We care about our staff, their well-being, their health. In 22 years, we’ve never had a theft. In our industry, that’s almost unheard of. And our average retention is five to seven years.”

Hampel lists some of her other strengths as determination, integrity and honesty. “I’d lose money before I’d ever cheat somebody. People really value honesty. And I don’t only care about our clients. I care about us doing a good job for them. It’s really important to me. And not that we’re 100 percent perfect. Nobody is. But we make it right. Our response time is within minutes of being alerted to a problem. We

have people in the office answering phones and emails. We really do care to get it right. So I think that’s a strength, too.

“I think the biggest message for me is I have very little tolerance for people who say they can’t do something. I also have very little tolerance for people who look at everything I’ve

achieved and say, ‘You’re so lucky.’ One of my friends told me that the next time someone says that to me, I should look at them and reply, ‘Yes, it’s funny, the harder I work, the luckier I get!’ And it’s true.

“And here’s the thing, too,” says Hampel. “With all the refugees we have working for us [almost 80 percent of the company’s workforce are immigrants from other parts of the world], try listening to their stories. They make mine sound like I’ve had it easy. They work two, three jobs to support their families. So when someone comes up to me and says they can’t do something, I tell them they can either cry about it or go do something about it. And we have so many people from all these countries who come here and work for us and they walk in the door and they say, ‘Thank you for giving me a job and this

opportunity.’ What if more people had that attitude instead of, ‘My life was so rough when I was a child that I can’t do this.’ Well, you’re not a child anymore. Get over it and move on.”

What the Future Holds

Today, Hampel’s grown children are all experiencing success, in their own ways. Jessica is a general counselor at a law firm; Parker is a manager at Hampel’s Utah office and is simultaneously attending University of Utah; Travis works full-time as a cleaner for Hampel’s company. And while two of the three are heavily involved in Clearview, there isn’t a succession plan yet. “Parker has shown some interest,” says Hampel. “We’ve had offers. Right now, I’m working on starting another division, which is different but in the same realm. I’ve talked to Parker about it. There’s also the possibility of selling Clearview and starting something else. “At the same time, the company is just moving up and getting bigger in every state where we do business. We’re looking at doing acquisitions or franchising. So there’s a lot to consider still. We have a great team.”

Hampel has also taken steps to diversify her assets and investments. “I have stocks, the company and 14 real estate properties, including commercial space, vacation and single-family homes — and they’re already generating income,” she says.

Considering Hampel’s success so far, it seems whatever decision she makes will reap rewards. Her mantra of hard work, perseverance, good business sense, honesty and determination to overcome any challenge has served her, her family and her community well.