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JOHNNY QUIRIN

Dave Balcom, Matt Balcom and Jennifer Holzwarth operate Unique Contracting Services, located at 1550 Gezon Parkway SW.

All in the family for industrial contractor

Pete Daly

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Running a business is fraught with financial peril. If the competition or an unstable economy doesn't get you, a treacherous employee or partner might.

Three years ago, not long after Dave Balcom started Unique Contracting Services, he realized he needed "somebody to watch my back."

Running the company by himself, he soon found himself very busy in the field, and for UCS, it is a big field — the company moves heavy factory machinery and sometimes the contents of entire plants, all over the U.S., Mexico and Canada. Balcom said he needed help back in the office, someone to manage the books and the office side of the business.

Once before, Balcom had had a business, but he said it went under when an office employee embezzled from the company. From that experience, he said he realized he needed someone with a vested interest in the company, a smart and hardworking individual he could trust.

The right person turned out to be his daughter. Today, Jennifer Holzwarth is the controller and her father's partner in the business.

He said the controller's job is just right for her.

"She usually tries to control me," joked Balcom.

"She pretty much handles the money end of it and keeps everything straight. She does many things here," he added.

Holzwarth, 32, is married to a journalist and the mother of two small children. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Aquinas College in pre-med studies in 1998, and then worked in real estate sales for several years.

A third member of the family is also involved with the company now: Balcom's son, Matthew, 28, is a millwright there.

Unique Contracting Services fills an industrial facilities management niche: If you have to move a factory across the country, they'll do it. The company provides millwright services for industry, specializing in moving and installing high volume, automated production lines.

Balcom and Holzwarth have an insider's view of what's been happening in American manufacturing over the last three years. Holzwarth said the economy is definitely having an impact on manufacturers here.

"Mostly credit — people not being able to get credit to move forward with their plans of growing or expanding," she explained.

Because she "does the books" and runs the office at Unique, she talks to all the customers and many would-be customers. Sometimes when she makes a sales call to a company that had been considering a change that would require the services of heavy equipment movers and millwrights, she will be told those plans have been put on hold. She said they first noticed a slowdown about two years ago.

"They'll tell you they're not going to do it right now because they don't have the funds or they can't get the funds," said Holzwarth. "A lot of people said they don't want to do anything in the uncertainty of these times. They're just kind of holding off, seeing what's going to happen and which way it's going to go."

She said they have seen companies in West Michigan come and go, but lately "there hasn't been a whole lot of moving in, unfortunately. ... It's got to go in cycles," she said.

Balcom said business for Unique was "pretty slow" all last year although he feels there was some improvement in the spring and hopes things will pickup despite "all this baloney going on" in the economy.

"These companies can't sit still," he said, adding that they have to either move to where they can be more profitable or become more lean through cost-cutting, down-sizing or productivity improvements so that they can stay in business here.

"We've just shipped a ton of stuff down to Mexico, unfortunately," he said.

Unique has about six or seven core employees, said Balcom. When the company gets a big job, it temporarily adds additional millwrights, which may bring the crew on a job to as many as 25 people.

Balcom's connections throughout industry in West Michigan go back more than 32 years. His industrial career as a millwright includes work at General Motors for 16 years, and then at Steelcase for another 16 years, where he was a supervisor.

A big job Unique did recently was to move a production line for Steelcase from Oakland, Calif., to Dallas.

Some companies, he said, have "leaned out" by reducing staff, including engineers. Those companies have, in effect, out-sourced skills, so now there are times when they must turn to companies like Unique, which can ramp up in a hurry for the big jobs.

"We can do the electrical, the plumbing, the hydraulics, pneumatics, the rigging and trucking. ... We're a one-stop company," he said. He competes against companies such as Gelock, Erickson and Grand Rapids Machine Repair.

Moving a factory production line can cost "anywhere from a half million dollars up to two million," said Balcom. Moving heavy equipment takes heavy equipment: Balcom has had to invest in several trucks, including a semi, plus eight fork lifts, some scissor lifts and other equipment.

"I cashed in my Steelcase retirement to start this thing," he said, joking that he was either "brave or stupid" to have made that investment.

As for manufacturing that has left Michigan in the last several years, Balcom said, "I think things will come back. Hopefully it will. ... We've seen some come back — very few, but some have," because of problems encountered offshore.

Balcom said one strength Michigan still has is the quality of its work force. He said his company moved an entire injection molding plant into Michigan a year or so ago: an auto supplier. That company moved here from another state because of the quality of the employees it could hire here, he said.

"Everyone blames Granholm for (the decline in Michigan manufacturing), but the automakers are the ones that are losing the (market) share," he said. Because so much of Michigan manufacturing is tied to the automotive industry, he said, "It just goes right on down the line from there."