

By Patrick Larkin

## Long-time family business awarded

If you walked into Metzger Building Materials Company in the mid-1980s, you might see as many as five Metzgers, not to mention the family dog, hanging out at the business.



Tex Metzger and Jane Metzger Von Haden

Tucked away along Phalen Boulevard at 768 Bradley St., the building supply business has been quietly chugging along for over 75 years and three generations. The modest place employs about 10 people and doesn't have a big sign proclaiming its existence. In fact, there's no sign at all. But then again, it might not need one. The business has held onto many of the same clients for decades, with a simple approach and a family name.

The U.S. Small Business Administration recently named Metzger Building Materials the "Minnesota Jeffrey Butland Family-Owned Business of the Year." The award recognizes long-term, family-owned businesses that have a track record of success. The award was more or less the Metzger family's first brush with publicity. Metzger Building Materials will be honored at the Minnesota Small Business Week Awards program on May 6 at the Minneapolis Marriott Northwest.

## Yelling kids

When third-generation company president Jane Metzger started off at her father's business, she worked as her mother's helper, keeping books. "We just sat and invoiced and waited on customers," she recalls. The two worked side-by-side, and for a while split the duties of taking care of Jane's young kids, who are now 10, 12 and 14. The children hung out in a play area alongside the desks. Very much in the vein of a family business, there were times when the kids would be screaming, the phones would be ringing, and a customer would be at the front desk.

Though the company had to tighten its belt during the Great Recession, things are looking up, Metzger says. In the Twin Cities "there's construction as far as the eye can see," she says.

## Decades of consistency

Metzger attributes the continued success of the company to decades where "we surrounded ourselves with top quality people" -- everyone from the staff to the clientele and the suppliers. It helps that the business held a number of clients for decades, which has to some extent recession-proofed it. They count a number of companies, including McGough Construction, Custom Drywall and a wide list of others, as regular customers. It's that consistency that's been part of the reason they've landed jobs at places like Target Field, the new Minnesota Vikings stadium, and the Nano Physics building at the University of Minnesota, she says.

Tony Von Haden, Jane Metzger's husband, says the place has more or less always been bustling. He says that's likely due to the service-oriented nature of the company. The family's run the business in a unique way, he says. "It's a bit unorthodox here, but it works." Since he married Jane about 30 years ago, he's seen the place come around full-circle. At first Jane's parents were running the show, and many employees

were nearing retirement age. Now, it's transitioned to a new generation of workers, and a new generation of workers, and a new generation of owners. It's kind of like watching a kid grow," he says. But there's still at least one veteran employee working there -- mild-mannered Dave Bleeke has been with the company for about as long as Jane -- he was hired 25 years ago by Gus Metzger after working in Zumbrota, Minn., as a bricklayer. The main "yard man" at the company, he says he's stayed there simply because "it's a real good place to work." It also helped that the owners have been "as good as can be," he says -- "friendly, generous, and caring." Tex Metzger, Jane's brother and part owner of the family business, describes



Dave Bleeke, "yard man" at Metzger's

### Deep roots

Robert Metzger, Jane and Tex's grandfather, originally founded the company in 1939. Robert settled in Minnesota from Germany, starting several businesses including Metzger Building Supplies. The original location was in the path of Interstate-94, and so the business moved to its current location in the mid-1960s. Three of Robert's four children helped him run the business, including his youngest son Gus, who eventually took over the business when Robert died.

In the '60s, Gus took a chance on a new material, and started selling drywall. That chance paid off -- drywall has been the company's bread and butter into modern times, and is still its main offering.

### Fourth generation?

Tex Metzger has been working at what was once his father's company for 30 years. He started by working summers in high school. Now 54, he's not expecting his own kids to carry on the family tradition. Three of his four sons are out of high school, and he says drywall isn't their thing. "They're pursuing their own interests and their own strengths," Tex says. He doesn't seem too upset about it -- it's tough work. "If everything goes great in 20 years, I'll be able to retire," he says, grinning.

Jane is hoping to keep the business in the family for the next generation -- she says one of her sons may start doing a little bit of work this coming summer. Jane herself didn't exactly plan on running the business -- she went to school to become a teacher, and was working as a substitute. Then her parents asked her to help out around the shop. Now, 25 years later, she and her brother are co-owners and running the place. "I guess I liked it," she says, explaining it allows her a certain amount of flexibility. That said, it's not the kind of place you can call in sick if you don't feel like going to work. Her family knows what's what. Though her father doesn't worry about the business or keep tabs, she says she likes to think she's running the company the same way he would. "You've got to treat it like you're passing the torch," she says.



Jane Metzger Von Haden, President since 2011