



Photos courtesy Perma-Dry

Foundations FOR SUCCESS

By Peter Saunders

Colleen Cole founded a basement-waterproofing business in Dartmouth, N.S., in 1978 with her husband Bill and after a period of steady growth, they began franchising in 1990. Now, as the company's owner, president and CEO, she has recently supervised a major rebranding of the Perma-Dry system, including the revamping of its business model.

Becoming a leader

Born and raised in Upper Musquodoboit, N.S., she originally planned to become a teacher, nurse or flight

attendant—the latter because she dreamed of travelling the world. Instead, she married Bill and helped run the contracting business in East Lawrencetown, N.S., that led to the development of Perma-Dry.

"We operated with pagers back then," she says. "I ran the office from our kitchen, answering the phone and doing the bookkeeping manually. A lot of it was self-taught and I studied accounting at night."

The Coles saw an opportunity to bring commercial repair processes to the residential market.

"Our concrete installation and repair work evolved into a specific focus on basement waterproofing,"



Colleen founded the business with her husband Bill, who passed away in 2009.

says Colleen. “Bill was fiddling around with a rubber band one day and it inspired him to find a product like that—something that wouldn’t be as rigid as epoxy and crack with each thermal cycle.”

By adapting existing products, experimenting on cracks in their own home and networking with a chemist, the Coles developed new systems, including not just their own proprietary waterproofing materials, but also a variety of methods for injection and application.

This approach was important because every concrete foundation wall is different, depending on crack locations, soil conditions and other factors.

“By 1985, we had established a good model, sending employees out across the Maritimes,” says Colleen. “We became recognized as a leader in the field.”

Five years later, they turned the original company into a franchise, and incorporated Permacrete Systems as a franchisor. They manufactured an entire

line of products on-site, selling them exclusively to franchisees.

“I oversaw the accounting and marketing as we became a franchisor,” says Colleen. “We attended franchising conferences and developed our system. We needed copyrights, trademarks, franchise agreements and disclosure documents.”

They also travelled the world, working in missions with non-profit organizations in needy areas.

The next evolution


After Bill passed away in 2009 from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, Colleen became president and CEO. One of her first big jobs was rebranding the company as Perma-Dry after losing the Permacrete trademark in the U.S.

“Fortunately, our franchise partners thought the rebranding was a great idea,” she says. “The last few years have really been another evolution for the business. We’re driving more traffic to our website for customer orders and even franchisee recruitment. And the franchise is now a complete turnkey package. We don’t just have a new logo, we have a new business model.”

Colleen has also kept her mission work going. Last October, she helped build a school’s kitchen in the Dominican Republic, dedicating it to Bill. And earlier this year, she travelled with International Needs Network throughout Africa, helping audit the donor-funded construction of schools, hospitals and clinics to ensure they met applicable standards.

“As a businessperson, I can help non-profits make sure their international partners follow their criteria,” she says.

As for Perma-Dry, even without Bill, it remains a family business. All three of his and Colleen’s children grew up in the company, putting themselves through school by working there. One of them even made it his career.

“Our son Danny has always worked in the company,” says Colleen. “Today, he’s my business partner as chief operating officer (COO) and vice-president (VP). And though my 10th grandchild is due in June, I’m not ready to retire yet!” 



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