

woman

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Ways to *Grow*
Business in a
Challenging
Economy

Whistler

Canada's Olympic Village

Arrow Exterminators

Aiming
for **Success**

Emily Thomas, President
Arrow Exterminators

Sept./Oct. 2008

\$4.95



www.atlantawomanmag.com

Emily Thomas aims to take
Arrow Exterminators to \$200 million
in revenues in the next eight years
– without going buggy

Spraying for Success

By Mary Welch

Emily Thomas' boyfriend lets her kill any cockroaches that cross their path.

"It's not like he's afraid of them or anything," she says. "It's just that he knows how much I love killing them. I raise my leg up high in the air and then bring it down fast and hard. And then I squish them. I'm passionate about killing them."

Good thing.

Such passion has served Thomas well in the family exterminating business. But now the 32-year-old has moved up and assumed the title of president of Arrow Exterminators, a \$97 million local firm started by her grandfather.

"I know it sounds crazy, but this business gets in your blood and you're hooked," she says. "I never had any intention of going into this business, but at the end of college I thought I'd give it a try and see what happens. I'm so lucky."

Arrow was started in 1964 by her grandfather James "Starkey" Thomas Sr., after a 25-year stint with Orkin Exterminators, also a local company whose third generation, Glenn Rollins, is now the public company's president. Thomas went out on his own with one truck and built the business from the ground up. He died in 1978. His son, Emily's father, James "Joe" Thomas Jr., took over and has what his daughter calls "the real vision. He had the vision and the nerves to grow it dramatically – from one office to 70. He grew up in the exterminating environment, and he knew how to grow it." Thomas' uncle Barry also is involved with the company.

Growing up in the bug business

Thomas also grew up in the business and remembers going to work with her dad as a child. "I'd go to meetings. Even as a little girl I tried being like him. My dad from when I was at a very early age made it well known that one day I would work here. But he never pressured me."

Although bugs never bothered her, she also admits the bug business didn't intrigue her either. At Vanderbilt University she studied anthropology and considered going to law school until her dad challenged her to check out the business. She discovered it was more than just squishing bugs.

"It's a people business," she says. "Our job is to protect people's health and their property. After I joined the company I learned the business from the ground up, and I understood why my dad was so serious – so passionate – about what he does."

Her father didn't just hand the business over to her. She says in fact that her father probably kept her in the field longer than he would have with another employee. In 2002 she was named chief operating officer.

"He wanted me to do it longer and better in order to overcome any misperceptions that the business was being handed over to me," she says. "I remember one day I came in late, and the manager sat me down and told me that such lack of devotion was not going to be tolerated, especially by me. God love him. In hindsight it was a gift. I had wonderful mentors who took me under their wing and guided me. I wasn't Daddy's little girl getting a company."

"Oodles in the hopper"

What "Daddy's little girl" is doing is maneuvering a family-owned business that already is a player into a dominant player in the fragmented pesticide business. "There are 19,000 pest control companies in the United States. We have grown to be ninth largest and the fifth largest privately held company," she says. "I have to look at short-term and long-term growth. Being private we can drop back and punt quickly. We're not a slave to quarterly numbers. We're at \$97 million in revenues, and I want to be at \$200 million in eight years."

In order to reach that \$200 million mark, Thomas says she has "oodles in the hopper."

Photography by Phillip Vullo





Emily Thomas indulges her love of skiing. She wanted to fill her father's shoes even at an early age.



Of course, one of the quickest ways is through acquisition, but that comes with its own set of challenges – namely cultural integration. Arrow has done more than 96 acquisitions in the past two decades, six in the past year. It currently has more than 1,000 employees.

“It has to be a cultural fit. That’s the biggest thing,” she says. “We are privately held, and we are a family-owned business. There is a danger to losing that culture. It’s scary because once you’ve lost it, it’s almost impossible to get it back and that is unacceptable to me.”

Merging cultures is a challenge, but the skill involved “gets better after each acquisition. We’ve learned how important it is to look at cultures. They don’t have to be identical, but there are some that just won’t work, and you have to realize that and walk. You can’t go in and change the personality and pride of a company.”

The key is to “get your intelligence done. Talk to people and be very candid. We don’t say that nothing will change after an acquisition, because that’s silly. But we tell the potential new acquisition, ‘Here is what we’re committed to, and here is our vision. We are a company – a culture – of passion and of being professional.’ Now, some companies don’t have that culture.”

Ensuring that the family values live on is one reason why there are no Arrow franchisees. “It’s by design,” she says. “It’s that we are committed to our vision. It’s a source of pride that we’re a family-owned and run business.”

A cherry on top of housing downturn

She also intends to grow the business organically – even in a housing downturn.

“I remember years ago where the papers were stacked on the desk for us to inspect new homes and home sales,” she said. “I miss those days, but like they say, challenges bring about new opportunities. The housing shortage is like a punch in the gut.”

She has helped the company invest in new infrastructure, including consolidating pretreatments and subsequent follow-up treatments into a New Construction Division, and the opening of a state-of-the-art national training center here in Atlanta. “One of our big pushes is to invest in the mechanisms to better communicate with our employees instead of to our employees,” she says. The company now has the

technology to communicate with its employees in each branch via videoconferencing, a change Thomas believes will help employee morale as well as solidify the culture.

Arrow also has started a handyman or carpenter division aimed at helping people do small jobs around the house. Sometimes, for instance, wood or walls have to be removed to treat termites and having people on staff who can put it back together “just makes sense,” she says. “We have a large staff of professional carpenters and artisans to go along with our pest control professionals, and people were always asking us to recommend people for projects they needed in their house. This way we’re able to respond to their requests and keep our staff working especially in the housing downturn. It’s a perfect fit.”

The housing downturn has worked to the company’s benefit – sort of. “When the housing marketing is booming, it’s hard to go after other opportunities like our handyman division,” she admits. “We might have gone down that road as well as other creative opportunities. I’m not

going to say the housing downturn doesn’t hurt, but because we went after other opportunities we’re better off than we would have been. It’s like the cherry on top and when the market gets better, we’ll be even that much more ahead. It’s made us a better company.”

Thomas is settling into her increased role and is confident in taking over the family’s legacy. A self-described “adrenalin junkie,” Thomas is also venturing out into the world of helping nonprofits. She belongs to a Young Presidents Organization. “Emily is a great example of what it takes to make it in the corporate world today – not just as a woman – but in general,” says Ginger Herring, president of 1st Franklin Financial. “She has ambition, drive, passion, courage, ethics and most of all an eagerness to learn and excel both personally and with her company. She brings new ideas and processes to the table and seems to thrive on achieving more.”

Another YPO colleague, Jerry J. Harrison Jr., CEO of Rock Creek Equity Holdings, calls Thomas “one of the strongest and most disciplined women that I have ever known. Emily’s strengths are her ability to read people and her absolute confidence in her ability to motivate those around her. She works tirelessly, yet enjoys each day of life to the fullest.”

She is on the board of directors of St. Jude’s Recovery Center, and its CEO, Marjorie Bush, believes Atlanta has a budding future leader. “Emily is mature beyond her years and capable of running and growing the business,” Bush says. “Her energy level and positive outlook is contagious. I know Emily cares deeply about her community, and her compassionate heart will make her one of Atlanta’s great leaders.”

Thomas acknowledges that she is extremely devoted to helping run and grow the company and expand its brand. Such enthusiasm can also be found in her love of skiing and her newest passion, kite boarding. “I saw someone doing it, and I said we had to do it,” she says. “So my boyfriend and I took lessons at the Outer Banks, and let me just say, it’s a lot harder than it looks.”

But whether it’s ensuring top-notch customer service, protecting the family-oriented culture or pursuing her passion for squishing bugs, Thomas is ready.

“I love challenges,” she says simply. “Especially extreme challenges.” ♀