

# Growing Through Adversity

**W**endy Grant of Cornwall City Press had attended the Print World trade show in Toronto before, but last November, after circumstances thrust her into the role of president, she felt intimidated to go as a novice decision-maker. "My first thought was, 'I'm an imposter.' But then I realized, 'I have to take the bull by the horns.'"

Grant became a co-owner of the print shop in May, 1994. Previously she had been a student and then an instructor of graphic design at St Lawrence College in Cornwall, Ontario (pop. 45,965), nestled on the bank of the St. Lawrence River, bordering New York State, an hour away from both Ottawa and Montreal.

Bob Blair, a graphic designer, was initially her instructor, then colleague. When both learned the graphics program was relocating to Kingston, half-an-hour later they phoned the couple who owned Cornwall City Press to ask about buying the business. When the answer came back, "Yes," Grant and Blair became business partners, along with Blair's wife Virginia (Ginny).

The previous owners were septuagenarian descendants of the shops founder, who started the business in 1927 in a small town near the Quebec border and later moved the operation to Cornwall.

When Grant and the Blairs acquired the business it consisted of small, mostly worn-out, offset and bindery equipment, two employees (one press and one bindery), and a strong customer list. Blair became president and Grant vice-president, with Ginny as treasurer doing accounting once a week while remaining employed elsewhere as an office manager.

"One of the first things we did was create a design department," recounts Grant. "I concentrated on doing the artwork and producing film and plates. Bob made sure all the rest got done and out the door, including pricing, meeting customers and

all the production control.

"As designers we had ordered printing from Cornwall City Press, so we knew they had limitations. In the first five years, besides fixing technical problems, we had two challenges: introduce ourselves to people in the community who didn't know us, and inform people already familiar with the business that the com-



*Virginia "Ginny" Blair (left) and Wendy Grant, the resourceful co-owners of Cornwall City Press, strive to grow their small-city print shop.*

pany had new owners and was undergoing improvements." They relied successfully on word of mouth and have never done much formal advertising.

"At first we worked and worked every night and every weekend, because we couldn't afford a lot of employees," recalls Grant, who learned to value hard work while growing up on a Quebec dairy farm. "By our fifth year, things were pretty good, and we didn't have to work quite as hard any more." But shortly afterwards Blair commenced a five-year struggle with cancer, forcing Grant to begin assuming his duties as well as her own. She remembers receiving her first instructions on manual estimating from him by phone from his hospital bed in Ottawa. "I knew nothing about running the back end, so it was baptism by hellfire," she recalls.

Blair rallied after chemotherapy and returned to work, but relapsed in 2007. He died in February 2008.

Following Blair's death, Grant credits four saviours—two suppliers, an Ottawa printer and a friend with an insurance business—with helping her find her feet. By last August she realized she had to upgrade the company's prepress systems and purchased a new Agfa Acento CtP system with ApogeeX workflow. "Sometimes making the right business decisions still takes me a lot of time," she admits.

The company continues to produce the general commercial work for local clients, using three small offset presses, a small Xerox digital colour printer and upgraded bindery. Since Blair's illness, Ginny has joined the company full time. She and Grant belong to local women's business networks and champion the Canadian Cancer Society and a treatment centre for abused children.

Currently they employ one person in bindery, two in prepress, a production coordinator-cum-digital-specialist, and one press operator. Reflecting the local community, many of the staff are bilingual.

The staff recently collaborated on a new logo to signify the company's new era, and Grant is now brimming with plans, such as outsourcing CtP services to local printers, expanding their geographic reach and developing their green initiative. She also hopes to grow the digital offering to accommodate their small-city clientele's need for diversity, believing digital will ultimately constitute 60 percent of their future business.

"Some days are still awful, but some days are spectacular because we laugh so much," asserts Grant. "We're determined we have to make a go of this, because we like the work and we want to stay together." **CP**

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