

## Feighan's company digging for business

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Kristina Feighan had an idea, a loan from a family member, a reliable business partner and little else when she started her own company at the age of 24.

Eight years later, she's thankful, not regretful, that she was a bit naive about what it would take to succeed.

Working out of a modest office on a dead-end street near the Mamaroneck train station, Feighan, the president of Northeast Environmental, oversees 15 employees in a company that removes and installs oil tanks, mops up spills and removes mold for business, residential and government customers.

Feighan is an anomaly in several ways. She's a woman in an industry dominated by men years her senior. And, as she is quick to acknowledge, when she began thinking about breaking off from her father's company and starting her own business, she didn't fully appreciate how difficult entrepreneurship would be.

"I think that was the benefit of being young," said Feighan, a mother of two young daughters. "I knew what I was doing was a big deal because other people told me it was a big deal. They were like 'You're crazy. Do you realize what could happen?' But ultimately I don't think I looked at all the negative things that could happen and that's what made it successful."

People aren't always accepting of a woman running a company — and men aren't the only offenders. Just last week, Feighan spent several minutes on the phone with a woman who would not believe Feighan was the president of the company and demanded to speak with someone higher up.

Feighan remained unflustered and the woman finally put her husband on the phone and the two spoke amicably.

Northeast Environmental had \$170,000 in sales during its first year and topped \$3 million by 2003. It is a private company that does not release detailed sales figures, but Feighan said the sales growth has been solid each year.

It usually costs about \$3,400 to remove a residential underground tank and install a new one. Taking out an above-ground tank and replacing it usually costs about \$2,400. Feighan said the company performs about five tank jobs a day.



Ricky Flores/The Journal News

Kristina Feighan, president of Northeast Environmental in Mamaroneck, started the company when she was 24.

### Have your say

RESIDENCE: Valhalla

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in sociology from Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa.

PERSONAL: Married with two daughters

AS A CHILD WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GREW UP?

A veterinarian.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB AND WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM IT?

Taking care of horses at a barn, mucking stalls, grooming. I learned responsibilities; care for something other than myself.

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST PROFESSIONAL OBSTACLE?

I think day to day I deal with the simple fact that I am a woman in a mostly male-dominated industry. It sometimes takes time for clients to warm up to that fact. Other times people think it is wonderful.

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST PROFESSIONAL MISTAKE?

Being too defensive at times, because of the customer's pre-conceived notion that they should be speaking with a man.

WHO WAS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSON IN YOUR LIFE AND HOW DID THAT PERSON INFLUENCE YOU?

My husband (Gregg Feighan). He made me a better person and helps encourage me when I

The heavy expense for a homeowner comes if a leak has caused contamination to the soil around an underground tank. Removing the soil costs the homeowner about \$5,000, though the cost varies, depending on the amount of soil that needs to be taken out.

Northeast Environmental does not test or inspect tanks.

The company recommends that owners replace their underground oil tanks after about 20 years because that's when water and rust tend to have taken a toll. Many people replace their tanks before selling their home, so the boom in the housing market has been a blessing for Northeast Environmental.

Feighan, a Valhalla resident who grew up in Thornwood, was a year out of Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa., where she got a sociology degree, and doing office work for her father's environmental services company when she decided to strike out on her own. She said she did not see herself as competing with her father's company.

"I never thought I'd be on any scale to compete with him," she said. "I thought that I would be able to be self-sufficient, to pay my bills and have a place to go Monday through Saturday."

Feighan decided right away she needed help and money.

The help came in the form of Dwayne Monaco, a friend who worked in Elmsford for a company called American Environmental Technologies. Monaco, now 35, had an itch to go into business for himself and a Rolodex full of valuable contacts.

He and Feighan decided to start a business partnership, one that continues today.

Feighan was then able to get a family member to loan her \$50,000, enough money, she and Monaco thought, to rent office space, install a phone line, buy heavy equipment and pay Monaco a small salary until the business began racking up some sales. Feighan didn't take a salary from the business, relying instead on a waitressing job for income.

"We had two desks, but nothing matched," Feighan said, recalling the company's hardscrabble early days.

Monaco spent the early days of the company calling potential customers and reaching out to contacts to drum up business. Feighan typed up letters to send to residents and businesses to let them know about the business, sort of a low-cost direct-mail campaign. The company couldn't afford an ad in the phone book.

When the company would get a request for a tank excavation or installation, Monaco would often head to the site and do the work himself. If it took more than one person he would hire a helper on a per diem basis to go along.

But the best decision Feighan and Monaco made was one that cost them little in money but a lot in stress. They paid \$200 to advertise their business on a diner menu. At the time, \$200 seemed like a lot to them.

"It was \$200 to do it and we were scared to do it, but we did it and we still do it to this day," Feighan said. "I think we got one or two hits, but with us being small and having low overhead that carried us for a month in terms of revenue and not being negative in the checkbook."

Business picked up gradually, allowing the company to make a small profit in its first year.

A couple years later, Feighan's father changed jobs, going to work as a salesman for the daughter who once worked for him.

The tank removals and installations account for about 70 percent of the company's business, with mold removal accounting for about 20 percent.

The company is also a state contractor and is sometimes called to clean up spills on the roads.

may be unsure about something. I am a stronger woman because of him.

WHAT HISTORICAL FIGURE DO YOU ADMIRE?

Mother Teresa because of her generosity to others and unconditional love.

**Have your say**

What type of business would you start if you could? Join the conversation in the "Working here" forum at <http://forums.lohud.com>