



Heavy Lifting for Nancy Smith at Washington Liftruck

By Nadra Angerman



Washington Liftruck owner and operator Nancy Smith.

For 12 years, Nancy Smith taught school and raised the kids while husband Mel ran the company, Washington Liftruck, a distributor of material handling vehicles, products and services. To Nancy, heavy lifting at that time was moving the groceries from the garage to the kitchen, taking the clothes from the hamper to the laundry room or sending an unruly student to the principal's office.

That all changed abruptly when Mel died of a heart attack one Saturday morning in 1985. Nancy quit her teaching job and started running Washington Liftruck the following Monday morning. It wasn't easy. She was thrust full throttle into a situation where she not only had to deal with the death of her husband, but help her children deal with losing their dad. Plus she had to juggle extended work hours and business trips with housecleaning and yard work, making meals for three kids, and transporting them to and from their schools and extra curricular activities. Every single day.

Her home was like a shipping yard, her car was like a container, and everything else became cargo. Had she been a member of the Port Association, she might have won an award.

It was a challenge to own and operate a material handling equipment company in a male dominated industry. The forks could lift between

16,000 and 120,000 pounds, but Nancy had the weight of the world on her shoulders. "I needed to learn the intricacies of the business, and I wanted to understand the needs of my customers," she remembers.

She made a break through when her business manager advised her to use her teaching skills in working with an important customer: "Think of him as a 7th grader."

Nancy went from not knowing what side of the forklift was "up" to Forklift Instruction 401.

She worked hard to enhance the company's associations with the stevedoring and railroad companies. She established a partnership with Forklift Services of Oregon, now Washington Liftruck's sister company.

With Nancy at the controls, Washington Liftruck earned other milestones when it was appointed as an Ottawa/Kalmar Trucks dealer for the State of Washington and later the Mitsubishi Caterpillar Forklift dealer in Western Oregon, Southern Washington and Northern California. Today, Washington Liftruck is a one-stop shop for everything from forklifts to yard tractors to power systems to pallet jacks and safety equipment.

Nancy's success shouldn't be surprising in some ways. She was in on Washington Liftruck from its birth. Her husband Mel was working for another company as a sales manager when he woke up one night at 1 a.m. and told a groggy Nancy he wanted to start his own forklift business. It took a while, but he convinced her it was a good idea.

She borrowed money against every penny of equity in their home to help him launch the business. She never dreamed she would someday run it. ■



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