

Family Business Spotlight: Lisa Conway of Pioneer Warehousing & Distribution, LLC

BY DONNA HERLIHY

We all may have read blogs, self-help articles, or books that address the topic, “Can you have it all?” Today, I share with you a question-and-answer session with a businesswoman who can answer that question affirmatively through her actions.

Meet Lisa Conway, director of marketing at Pioneer Warehousing & Distribution, LLC in the town of Clay. Conway represents the second generation at the family business — she’s the daughter of Tom Belge, president of Pioneer Warehousing & Distribution.

The company, which employs 20 people, offers general and contract warehousing, distribution, fulfillment, and other services. Pioneer occupies 390,000 square feet with customers including Wegmans Foods, Southern Wine and Spirits, Hospira Pharmaceuticals, Sysco Foods, Verizon, Amerada Hess, Intersurgical, Associated Spring, and Walmart.com.

Conway makes it all sound easy, even with her full plate of being a wife, mother of three children — Jaydon, 6, Jacob, 4 and Lia, 1 — as well as daughter, sibling, employee, and own person.

Q: What was your first job at Pioneer?

A: My first job here involved mainly office work, but I do remember one summer at age 14 when one of our customers needed us to help remedy a mistake that it had made when making its product. And I, along with another person, had to spend an entire summer adding an ingredient to their product. Which meant basically, I started right in with whatever needed to be done; I did it.



Conway

Q: The most memorable thing you learned from your father?

A: One thing, oh my, that is a hard question — he has taught me so much. I think I would have to say the value of the dollar. He really instilled that into all of us from a young age. He always made us work hard for what we have.

I worked through high school and college and I think that really helped a lot with how we live our lives and value what we have.

Q: Most memorable lesson learned from your mother?

A: To be strong! When I was little, she never let me be too girly. She always wanted me to be independent and be able to stand on my own two feet. On the other hand, she taught us how to be caregivers, by example. She took great care of us.

Q: Who was the greatest inspiration and influence on your life?

A: I cannot pick one person. I would definitely say my parents. Absolutely my parents, but each in different ways.

Q: What is the company’s greatest success?

A: One of the things we pride ourselves in is we keep clients for years and years and years. I would say our greatest success is how long we keep our clients. Not only our clients but also our employees — our turnover is very minimal.

Q: Your greatest personal success?

A: Do you mean besides my family and children — because they would have to be my greatest success? I have so much to be grateful for. I was successful before I came back here to the family business in finance, and I feel I have been successful here professionally.

Q: What is the biggest thing you have contributed to Pioneer Warehousing since you have been here?

A: We recently implemented a warehouse-management system. It was a big deal. We used to do everything by hand and Excel spreadsheets. I researched it and implemented it and it has made a world of difference on how we manage our warehouse.

Q: How do you support the community?

A: We have been part of, and a big supporter of, the local transportation club, which supports local students and scholarships. We do as much as we can. We participate and support where and when we can. We support several local children’s sports teams, employee bowling leagues, and other community events like that.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK FAMILY BUSINESS CENTER

Pioneer Warehousing & Distribution, LLC, located in Clay.

Q: When did you realize you emerged from the shadows?

A: When I came back to the business, I was a little timid working with the people who had been here for years. It took a couple years before I was confident enough to realize I had some really good ideas. I feel my dad has really started to trust me with projects, being innovative, and trying to grow the company. The proof of that is that he feels comfortable taking longer vacations. He is not handing me the reins, but he is giving me more responsibility.

Q: Words to live by?

A: Be honest and follow your heart. Being a trustworthy business partner is most important.

Q: Advice for other future leaders at family businesses?

A: Work hard and be who you are. It is tough in a family business. You need to earn the respect from everyone; it is not just handed to you because of who you are. I chose to be here.

Q: What is the best thing about being a family business?

A: We are a small family business, so there is camaraderie and the opportunity to share in the joy, the ups, the downs, and be able to talk to someone on the fly. I not only have a dad but I have a friend and a great coworker. I really love it. It’s always an open-door policy. I would never be able to share my ideas and implement so much so quickly in corporate America.

Q: The worst thing about being a family business?

A: For me, I lose myself sometimes. I forget I am talking to my boss; it’s hard to draw lines. In staff meetings, sometimes I forget that I am talking to the boss and not my dad. Right now, we are living with my parents as our house is being built. So we are together all the time, and at the moment, it is a little different than usual.

Q: What do you do in your leisure time?

A: I coach both boys in soccer. I am training for a triathlon and going to the park with the dogs and the husband and kids. I spend as much time with my family as I can.

Q: Do you have a great story about Pioneer?

A: After the big blizzard in the early 1990s, our roof caved in. We had a lot of product in our warehouse and it was a Friday night. All of our employees came in and worked together to relocate the product and clean up. It was weeks of working long days and nights. They worked their butts off. They brought crocks and platters of food with them so they could just continue working long hours. The employees made it work. When it was over, our company was stronger than ever. If we didn’t have the support from the employees, the outcome could have been much different. I was not here then, but my dad, and his partner at the time, Ray Dionne, led them through this.

Q: Do you have a great story about Pioneer?

A: After the big blizzard in the early 1990s, our roof caved in. We had a lot of product in our warehouse and it was a Friday night. All of our employees came in and worked together to relocate the product and clean up. It was weeks of working long days and

nights. They worked their butts off. They brought crocks and platters of food with them so they could just continue working long hours. The employees made it work. When it was over, our company was stronger than ever. If we didn’t have the support from the employees, the outcome could have been much different. I was not here then, but my dad, and his partner at the time, Ray Dionne, led them through this.

Q: What do you see as the future of Pioneer?

A: The future for the company I see is in order fulfillment. Most people know that we do general warehousing, but where I see the future is e-commerce. We are a logistics company, from placement of the orders to the delivery. We pull the orders from the Internet, pick them, pack them, ship them, and track them. The client does not have to do anything but take care of its business.

Q: How is the company handling succession planning?

A: My succession planning with my father is probably on the five-year plan. I have been here for about five years and have learned a lot and we still have some to go. The one thing that I feel was very important is that I went away from the family business and did my own thing first. I earned my business degree, worked in real estate, and at Wells Fargo for several years before I came into the business full time. I would definitely want the same thing for my children. I would love it if they wanted to work with me in the future but I will encourage them to go out and work with others first.

Q: How do you benefit from the New York Family Business Center?

A: I have met so many great people. We all have so much more in common than you would ever think. Surrounding yourself with like-minded people is very important. I have a jam-packed schedule, but making time for peer-group discussions is a great part of the day. After each session, I come back and talk to my father about what I might have learned from my peers. Maybe not every time, but usually I am able to implement something that someone might have mentioned or suggested during these sessions.

Q: Do you have any comments about the statistic indicating that a large percentage of women will be taking over their family business in the next decade?

A: I have a lot to say about that. Women have so much to offer that is different than men. We have different characteristics, different strengths, and different time frames. We take action. There is so much that has not been tapped into yet that we have to offer. I look forward to watching my daughter grow and see what she will be able to do.

Donna Herlihy is the executive director of New York Family Business Center (www.nyfbc.com), a Syracuse-based not-for-profit that gives family owned business owners and managers opportunities to interact and learn from each other and from family business professionals.