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West Virginia's Top Family-Owned Business Spans Four Generations

SUMMERSVILLE, W.Va. – When L.J. Hughes came to West Virginia from Indiana, Pa. in 1942 to do an exploratory drilling project he probably never realized he was embarking on an entrepreneurial endeavor that would extend through four generations of the Hughes family.

L.J., who started his diamond core drilling business in the 1920's, discovered a great demand for his expertise in the state and decided to relocate his family to the Summersville, Nicholas County area. In 1946 he was joined in the business by his two sons, Robert and Charles, and his daughter and son-in-law Evelyn and Fletcher Herold joined in 1952.

As the company progressed, a third generation entered the business; Charles' twin sons David M. (Mike) and John M. (Mick) Hughes in 1973, Fletcher Herold, Jr. in 1975 and Fletcher's sister, Rebecca Adkins, in 1990. In 2006, a fourth generation came on board, nephew Jeffrey Lilly.

This year the company named for its founder, L.J. Hughes & Sons Inc., is being honored by the U.S. Small Business Administration as West Virginia's 2010 **Jeffrey Butland Family-Owned Small Business of the Year**. The largest diamond-drilling contractor on the East Coast has also been selected as SBA's Region III top Family-Owned Small Business. Region III includes Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington D.C. and West Virginia.

As for how the company started, L.J.'s grandson, and company vice president Mick Hughes said, "Our grandfather, who was a driller for the Hoffman Brothers Drilling Co. in the early 1920's, was out-producing most of the 50 or so core drillers they employed. As the story goes, he asked Mr. Hoffman for a raise and was turned down. So he promptly quit and purchased two steam powered core drills and went out on his own."

After the company began and the family relocated to West Virginia, L.J.'s children had no intention of going into the drilling business. But as Mick said, "It happened!" The same can be said for the current owners. After all had graduated from college, they too had no intention of joining the business, but again Mick said, "Here we are!"

As for Mike's interpretation, he added, "I remember growing up every family meal seemed to be interrupted by a drilling related phone call. It was an awful intrusion on the family and it sort of ticked me off. I thought at the time I didn't ever want to do that. But, as Mick said, here we are."

Mike, Mick and Fletcher all worked for the company during the summers while attending school, obtaining a good knowledge of how the business functions from the ground up. They all worked in the field as drillers helpers, helped out at the shop, and did anything that needed done.

“After graduating from college we each realized through our working at the company during the summers, the family business gets into your blood,” Mike said. “I came out of college and started right in as a driller’s helper in the field. This position was one of the lowest paid in the company and, as I like to tell it, made me one of the lowest paid college graduates ever.”

It’s a good thing they learned the business as they later found out. Their father, Charles, and his brother, Robert, who both ran the company at the time, each passed away suddenly over a two-year period. These events necessitated the need for Mike, Mick and Fletcher to immediately fill the role as company leaders, one they didn’t necessarily want at the time, but were glad to fulfill.

“We each grew up learning every aspect of the business, which was the most valuable education we could have ever received,” Mike said. “It really prepared us for our roles today. With the experience we obtained, we can relate to any problem or answer any question that pops up.”

They give several reasons how business has survived over the past 80 years, but the real backbone of their success is best relayed by Fletcher.

“What have truly made L.J. Hughes & Sons so successful are its employees. We’ve had our ups and downs over the years, but through it all it’s the employees that have carried the company,” Fletcher said.

The trio is also aware very few family businesses survive past the second generation. They credit their ability to work together and strive to make things as fair as possible. They realize they don’t always agree on everything but things always work out.

Another factor that keeps them coming to work every day is found in its name, L.J. Hughes & Sons Inc.

“It’s our grandfather’s name that hangs out on our shingle and every truck we have on the road and we take a great deal of pride in that,” they all agreed.

If the past 80 years are any indication, that pride will keep this family-owned business around for generations to come.

L.J. Hughes & Sons, Inc. was nominated by Jim Epling, center manager at the Region 1 Workforce Small Business Development Center in Summersville.

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