***CNS: High Tech in a Small Town***

By Susan Petro

Tucked away in Poolesville’s original brick office park is a decidedly high-tech firm that offers information technology (IT) support for a wide range of businesses, nonprofit agencies, and government organizations such as the National Institute of Health, the Humane Society of the United States, and the Department of Defense. CEO Karen Kalantzis and Vice-President of Business Development Marshall Michaels cofounded Computer Network Services, a small low-voltage cabling installation company with just three employees in the basement of their townhouse in 1993. Twenty years later, CNS has grown to five offices and forty-four employees. Their main office is now located in Poolesville.

Karen and Marshalls each have extensive experience and knowledge in the computer science industry. Karen holds an MBA from George Washington University and a Bachelor of Science Degree from Indiana University. Marshall has a Bachelor’s of Science degree in Computer Science from Ohio University. Although each had expertise in many aspects of computer and network support, they decided to focus their attention on creating a low-voltage cable installation business. At the time, the job of cable installation fell to many of the baby bell companies that were created when AT&T was split up by a court ruling. Marshall said many of these companies did sloppy work, so they decided that they could do a better job than what the other companies were offering. With a $10,000 loan from Marshall’s father, they formed CNS.

Early on, Karen and Marshall decided to set themselves apart by paying attention to the even smallest details of operations. For instance, when installing a simple cable jack, many company technicians did not bother to clean up the mess they created when cutting out the drywall, and they neglected to label the cables. By taking simple measures like wiping off the dust, and adding labels to the cabling, CNS built up a steady stream of satisfied customers. The business grew through mostly word-of-mouth advertising.

Within five months, their original loan was paid back. As business grew, CNS began providing additional services and soon evolved from cable wiring to a full-service IT support company. Eventually, the company moved away from cable wiring altogether.

Although Marshall said he originally did not set out to become an entrepreneur, when he looks back at growing up, he realized he had many entrepreneurial traits from an early age. He described his first experience making money when, as a third-grader, he would buy packs of gum and then resell individual pieces for a tidy profit; often making five dollars on fifty cents’ worth of gum. Two years later, he formed a crew of friends and neighbors to expand his father’s driveway. When he informed his father that his crew needed to be paid for their efforts, his dad came back with a piece of paper totaling Marshall’s living expenses up until that time; a bill for $35,000. Marshall said his early experiences with his dad and the driveway project taught him his first labor negotiating skills.

When asked about the benefits of location, Marshall describes Poolesville as “one of the best-kept business secrets in the D.C. area.” Marshall said the relatively-easy commute to D.C., Frederick, and Northern Virginia is a plus for his employees who need to reach clients in those areas. Additionally, the area has an excellent pool of local talent. Because much of the service that CNS provides is done remotely, most employees can work from where they live. Only five of CNS’s employees actually live and work in Poolesville. The others are spread out throughout the country in locations such as Baltimore, Florida, Wisconsin, and Cincinnati. Luckily, with a phone and a computer, CNS employees can take their livelihood with them if they move out of the area.

Although much of CNS’s client base is located outside the town, the company maintains a significant presence in Poolesville and beyond through their Community Counts initiative. The employees support the community through individual and team involvement with multiple charitable causes. Karen said, “We are lucky that we have a lot of charity-minded employees who are very good at what they do at their jobs and have good hearts. They are willing to pitch in and do a lot of good things.” Each year, the employees participate in food drives and other fund-raising campaigns for WUMCO and other local charities. They “adopt” a needy local family to provide gifts for the holidays and sponsor a local sports team. Karen adds that they are also involved in Poolesville’s annual 5K race and produce many summaries, brochures, and pamphlets for class graduation ceremonies, sports teams, and other organizations. Marshall coaches youth basketball.

Computer Network Services is not only committed to helping out the community, they are also dedicated to their own employees’ well-being through their Wellness Counts program. They provide regular stay-healthy incentives such as annual flu-shot clinics, brown-bag lunches, guest speakers, and sponsorships of athletic events to help their employees maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Although Marshall describes his early philosophy as “making the most amount of money with the least amount of work,” clearly, he and Karen devoted a maximum amount of time and effort to create a thriving company that is an asset to their clients, the employees, and local residents.