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Energy Future Holdings

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WBE Extraordinaire
Kathie Edwards
Westpark Communications

Kathie Edwards

leads Westpark Communications to new heights

BY DEANN DALEY HOLCOMB

If entrepreneurial spirit is genetic, perhaps Kathie Edwards was destined to take the reins of her family's company and lead it into a new century. What began as Westpark Answering Service, a six-person company established by Edwards' mother and aunt in the late 1960s is now—under Edwards' guidance—Westpark Communications LP, an advanced technology company.

Edwards has been the firm's owner, president and CEO since 2007. Houston-based Westpark Communications operates two 24-hour call centers offering services around the country to more than 800 clients, including law firms, retail electric providers, homebuilders and oil and gas companies. Clients include KBR Inc; Halliburton; BP p.l.c.; Dynegy Holdings LLC; Mega Energy; Schechter, McElwee, Shaffer & Harris LLP; and Texas Children's Hospital.

Formerly a veteran health care executive with experience in contract negotiations, provider relations and call center management, Edwards later quit that job to volunteer full-time with the Make-a-Wish Foundation. That's when her mother, Edna Burgan Wesneski, turned to her for help with the day-to-day operations of the company, after suffering a downturn in business.

"I only had intentions of helping her get her client base back up again," Edwards recalled. "But, I was hooked. I saw so much potential for positive change and growth for the business and just knew it was where I wanted to be."

Once Edwards acquired Westpark Communications, she implemented new technologies and services, including live-answer, order entry, email response, surveys, appointment-setting, reservations, payment-handling and processing, employee check-in, disaster-routing and business continuance.

The expansion of services was a winning move. In the past five years, company revenues have grown by 70 percent and the number of employees by 180 percent.

Among Edwards' first challenges was building a team of qualified employees. "We are an extension of our client's busi-

ness, so it is very important to provide excellent customer service to their callers. The level of customer service we provide and the tenure of our employees is outstanding," she said. The average agent tenure at Westpark Communications is more than three years, compared to the industry average of just over one year.

All applicants undergo a background check, and to ensure consistent and continuous high levels of customer service, all employees must possess a best-in-class level of comprehension, spelling, grammar and voice quality, according to Edwards. Employees participate in ongoing training and coaching through the company's quality assurance coordinators, along with monthly Webinars and seminars.

"We are heavily involved with retail electric providers, in providing full, turn-key customer service as overflow from their internal call centers or as their outsourced, full customer service department," Edwards said. "We have a separate call center specifically for REP clients. We have been working with REPs for over five years now. I opened my second location in 2011 with the goal of increasing [our reach and presence] in this industry, so we are ready for a lot of growth."

The new facility located in northwest Houston houses 70 call center seats, offering 140 full- and part-time positions and encompassing 8,000 square feet. In addition to providing more space, the office provides a back-up to the original site.

"We have many clients who depend on us being available 24/7. If anything ever happened to one of my locations, I now can reroute my agents to the other facility," Edwards explained. "We already have disaster-routing in place for phones, data and electricity. But, if there was a fire- or weather-related damage which caused us to vacate, we now have secured a process."

Edwards is an ardent supporter of women-owned businesses, serving on the board of directors of the Women's Business Enterprise Alliance.

"The year before I purchased Westpark

Kathie Edwards



Communications, I went through the process of getting the company certified through WBEA," Edwards said. "I began getting very involved and created wonderful business relationships with other certified women owners. What I have gained in being certified is the incredible support of other entrepreneurial women in all industries. We've been able to refer business to each other and provide references for our own clients and associates."

Edwards believes her company's growth is tied to networking with the WBEA and Houston West Chamber of Commerce, as well as her volunteer and community work.

The growth is extraordinarily satisfying for Edwards, whose commitment and enthusiasm for Westpark Communications has grown more profound over the years.

"I feel I have the loyalty of my employees, which is reflected in the loyalty of our clients," Edwards said. "I am able to work on my business, instead of in my business. I respect all of my employees and know that I can trust them to make the right decisions." □