

# thinking small is **BIG BUSINESS** in O.C.

Companies with fewer than 50 employees are leading the way with their entrepreneurial spirit and unwavering faith in self-determination

by Rosalva Hernandez

**A**t first glance, it might be difficult to spot a link between a 3-year-old Santa Ana staffing company, a fourth-generation, family-run mortuary in Anaheim and the traditional aspects of religion.

But a connection becomes clear when you begin to understand what propels the owners of these two, very different small businesses: Both Rodney Hopkins of Darnell Technical Services and Becky Areias of Hilgenfeld Mortuary hold a simple, deeply personal and unabashed faith in what they do. And that faith has spurred the small business community in Orange County to record growth in recent years. Of course, it helps they're in a region that nurtures such ventures.

## FEATURE: SMALL BUSINESS

"Small businesses flourish in Orange County's entrepreneurial climate," touts the 2007 Orange County Community Indicators report, a compilation of government, university and private research data detailing change or stability in a wide spectrum of topics affecting the county.

Fewer residents work in large firms (500-plus employees) in Orange County than the statewide average (19 percent versus 21 percent in 2005), according to the report. And the number of small firms (those with fewer than 50 employees) has grown the most since 2001.

Of course, some of this growth is due to sheer logistics. Orange County—historically viewed as a vast bedroom community to its heavily urbanized neighbors—has largely been defined by the smaller family and individual-owned businesses that tend to sprout in such areas.

lending programs, the county has an abundance of small-business counseling and training organizations, such as SCORE, a volunteer corps of retired business owners; the Small Business Development Centers, including Tri-Tech SBDC, which focuses on high-tech and high-growth companies; and the Institute for Women Entrepreneurs.

"When you surround them with so much support, you don't give them room to fail," Quijada explains.

Support from the SBDC and SCORE helped Hopkins focus on his company's growth and allowed him to develop relationships within an established local network.

"It's a business of relationships," says Hopkins, who worked for three technical staffing companies before establishing his own.

He met his wife, Pamanita, a design engineer, through one of his consultants in

the face of overwhelming change. Take the Russell clan, for example.

In 1930, Santa Ana plumber James H. Russell took destiny into his own hands when he quit working for a local outfit to be an independent contractor. But World War II, with its severe lead and copper shortages, soon scuttled the business.

Undaunted, Russell and his son, Jim, launched a second venture in 1946. With the post-war building boom, they were soon off and running. By the 1970s, when grandson Steve entered the family businesses, the Russells were a fixture in the city.

Like his grandfather and father before him, Steve Russell says it's not about trying to be the biggest or wealthiest; it's about doing your best in providing a service.

"We just want to keep it going the way it is," he says. "You get too big, and you can't control it."

"We're just glad that we can be there at a very emotional time in their lives.  
We're here to help them, guide them, service them at a time  
when they may be lost, spiritually. ...  
We think of it as a ministry."

—Becky Areias, Hilgenfeld Mortuary in Anaheim

But even as the county outwardly evolved from a quiet, agricultural community to an affluent, high-tech mecca, its soul remained adamantly entrepreneurial, as evidenced by the record \$437 million in loans made to Orange County businesses by the U.S. Small Business Administration's Santa Ana District Office in 2006. In fact, the administration's Santa Ana District, which also serves Riverside and San Bernardino counties, was second in the nation in total dollars loaned and first in the nation in Section 504 (real estate) loans totaling \$395 million in 2006.

"We live in a very vibrant county," says Adalberto Quijada, director of the administration's Santa Ana District. "It boasts a great infrastructure in which to do business and where small businesses can thrive."

In addition to ready access to capital

1992. It was a fateful meeting. Together they identified the critical need for engineering staffing in burgeoning Orange County and decided to help fill it by combining their talents.

In January 2004, with roughly \$175,000 in savings and a giant leap of faith, Darnell Technical Services began doing business.

Now, only three years later, the business has grown by 60 percent and its internal staff to six. The couple hopes to open offices on the East Coast and the Midwest over the next three years.

"More than anything, it's about helping people," says Hopkins. "That's important to us. We call it a ministry for the joy and pleasure of helping others."

That passionate commitment, that underlying belief that what they do matters, has sustained many small businesses in

Repeat customers are 90 percent of the family's business, and word of mouth delivers a tidy 5 percent increase in orders each year. Despite encroachment from a flurry of new rivals and a growing do-it-yourself movement, Steve, 58, foresees a strong future for the company.

"You can't make everyone happy, but we try," he says. "I'm just proud of the fact that we're still around after all these years."

That same sentiment is shared by Areias of Hilgenfeld Mortuary.

Few things in life are as inevitable as death. But the path to eternal rest takes many forms, and it is in those forms where competition for a mortuary business lies.

"It's not that there are newer mortuaries, but prices are always dropping," says Areias, who began helping with the fami-