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Stair Goddess owners Dan and Becky Herring stand near a display in their store in City Centre Plaza in Appleton. The couple started the staircase company in 2002 and now sell and offer staircase installation nationwide. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

Appleton stair company rises to the challenge

Started almost by accident in 2002, couples' company has national customers

By Kristin Brantmeier Stankewicz

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When a prominent Illinois couple needed a staircase for their half-million-dollar imported marble foyer, they didn't head to a design firm in Chicago or Milwaukee. Instead, they chose Stair Goddess LLC, a two-employee custom staircase business in Appleton.

"That was only our second job," said Dan Herring, co-owner of Stair Goddess with his wife, Becky. "It cost \$180,000. That's when we felt like, 'hey, maybe we can do this.'"

Stair Goddess, now located in City Centre Plaza in Appleton, has been creating staircases since 2002. The company started almost by accident.

When Becky Herring gave birth to the couple's first child in 2002, she was content working for another local stair company. Dan worked in hydraulics and pneumatics. The Herrings planned to put their baby in daycare and continue their jobs.

Becky soon discovered she hated using daycare. "After one day, I asked Dan to quit his job and stay home with the baby," she said. "I was making more money at the time, so it made sense."

Dan agreed, and began plans to start a home-based Internet business.

Soon after, a misunderstanding led Becky and her employer to part ways. The couple decided to

capitalize on her knowledge of the stair industry, and formed their own staircase company in their basement.

Community First Credit Union assisted with financing. "We're really grateful for that. You don't find a lot of financial institutions that would go out on the wire for you," said Dan. "We couldn't have done it without them."

They found the name "Stair Goddess" by chance.

"One of my old customers called me at home to find out why I'd left my previous job," Becky said. "She said to me, 'Well, stair goddess, I'm going where you're going.'"

"I said, Stair Goddess, that's it, that's the name!" said Becky.

Competing against her former employer wasn't painless. "They dropped their bid for that customer significantly, to make sure we didn't get it," Becky said. "I told the customer she'd be crazy if she didn't take it."

Looking out for the customer's best interests, even if it costs them business, is something the Herrings say they strongly believe in. "Customers are more than just a quote number. You need to build a relationship," Becky said. "We try to be good people helping good people."

"And we never dis the competitor's product," she said.

The Herrings prefer to educate potential customers about the benefits of doing business with Stair Goddess.

Unlike some staircase companies, "We do field measuring," Becky said. "Most companies make you give them the measurements and sign

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Stair/National sales representatives helped company grow

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off. With us, builders don't have to worry."

"Our staircases are built by an Amish firm in Ohio. They're built there, then shipped by covered truck to the job site," she said. Stair Goddess offers full installation nationwide.

Prices range from under \$10,000 for a simple, curved staircase to more than \$250,000 for an elaborate showpiece, said Dan.

Since 2002, the Herrings estimate they've done "a couple hundred" staircases. In addition, they sell stair pieces and parts, as well as custom doors.

Dan believes the company's sales representatives help Stair Goddess attract customers from all over the country.

Initially, the Herrings weren't looking to hire any sales reps. But three months after the company started, three experienced reps

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— **Becky Herring**, co-owner of Stair Goddess, Appleton

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contacted them, looking for a job.

"We had nothing to offer them," said Becky. "No printed literature; the Web site wasn't even done."

Two of the three signed on immediately anyway. The third followed about a year later.

The reps, who now cover New England, the Southeast, the Midwest, and New York/New Jersey, all work as independent contractors "because that's how they prefer to do it, and that's fine with us," Dan said. The Herrings handle Wisconsin.

"We were just lucky that they were looking at the same time we were starting," Dan said. "They were the catalyst to us growing as fast as we did."

"We are truly blessed. It's more than just luck, it's divine intervention," said Becky.

With the birth of their second child last year, the Herrings realized they had outgrown their basement office. They found showroom space at City Centre Plaza and held a grand opening two months later.

"The response and reception were amazing," said Dan.

Working together every day as a married couple has presented some unique challenges. "You have to be polite, but get your point across," said Becky.

"We use blunt honesty, especially at work," said Dan. "We have to make sure both of us understand each other, 24/7. We smile a lot, we laugh a lot."

As far as future plans, "we're very happy where we're at for now," Dan said. "We're trying to stay under the radar a little until the kids are in school."

Meanwhile, "we're constantly researching new products," said Becky. "We try to stay one step ahead of what's forecasted."

The Herrings enjoy their entrepreneurial lifestyle. "It's really unique to wake up and look forward to work," Dan said.

"We sometimes argue about who gets to go in today," said Becky with a laugh.