Home, Sweet Business

RHEA SIMMS ’78 GROWS SMALL REAL ESTATE FIRM INTO REGIONAL POWERHOUSE

By Kim Bower-Spence
When Rhea Politis Simms ’78 bought Lewith & Freeman Real Estate in 1986, she felt she had to either keep the Kingston, Pa., company small and “boutique” or adopt technology and grow.

She opted for the latter. Simms recruited new agents and sought areas ripe for expansion, buying a small real estate firm in Luzerne County’s Back Mountain area. Later she expanded with additional offices in Mountain Top, Drums and Wilkes-Barre. Three years ago, Lewith & Freeman branched into Lackawanna County, opening an office in fast-growing Clarks Summit. The company has grown from one office staffed with eight people to six offices with 120 realtor associates and support staff.

“We became more regional in our thinking,” Simms says, explaining her strategy. She recognized the need for greater regional planning and thinking.

The company added a mortgage department, title insurance and insurance services for clients. Though she’s been approached numerous times over the years to join national franchises, Simms remains committed to operating an independent agency. “I’ve always felt that real estate is personal. People want to be taken care of, and people want personal service.”

She attributes her company’s growth to dedicated sales associates and excellent managers. The company hires carefully and emphasizes training. Mentors guide new agents for several months as they learn the business.

The formula works. Lewith & Freeman ranks first in Luzerne County for factored sales volume, just shy of $330 million in 2006. In Lackawanna County, the company ranks in the top five of 75 real estate offices. “Growth comes with good training, good people, good relationships,” she emphasizes.

One of the Wyoming Valley’s most prominent businesswomen, the Shavertown, Pa., resident entered Wilkes as a music major in 1958. She left in 1960 to marry Ron Simms ’60 and move to Oklahoma for his military service. When they returned to the Wyoming Valley, she was raising three daughters while earning her real estate license and taking courses toward the history degree she completed in 1978.

“I was by far a more serious student coming back than I was as an 18-year-old,” confesses Simms, who enjoyed her interaction with the younger students. She recalls gathering around the kitchen table with her young daughters to do homework. “We kind of all studied together.”

Real estate, with its flexible schedule, seemed like a good business for a woman with young children. Those daughters now help their mother, Lewith & Freeman’s chief executive officer, manage the company. Virginia Simms Rose, broker associate, serves as its president, and Emma Simms Kluger is vice president. Margaret Simms Evans serves as corporate secretary/treasurer.

Simms’s history degree piqued her interest in biography, particularly in people whose lives benefited the community, whether locally or globally. She has subsequently endeavored that her company should significantly serve the community.

Real estate doesn’t consume all of Simms’ time. She became the first and only woman to chair the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce, a post she held in 1993-94. She has also served on the boards of directors for King’s College, the Wilkes-Barre Board of Realtors and Mellon Bank Northeast Region. She is a founding member and still serves on the board of The Luzerne Foundation and is a director of the Children’s Service Center. She chairs the Earth Conservancy, a Wyoming Valley group dedicated to guiding the reclamation of over 17,000 acres of mine-scarred land and contributing to conservation and economic development.

“She has this grace under pressure. She’s just a great role model for women.”

– Donna O’Toole Sedor ’85

Rhea Politis Simms
Shavertown, Pa.
B.A., History 1978
Career: Owns Lewith & Freeman Real Estate, a full-service agency serving Luzerne and Lackawanna counties.
Notable: Over 20 years, expanded the business from one office with eight people to six offices and 120 people.