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BUSINESS COURIER

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Retiring Messer CFO Kathy Daly spent decades in leadership role

Business Courier of Cincinnati - by [Lucy May](#) Senior Staff Reporter

Kathy Daly remembers clearly her first encounter with Pete Strange.

It was 1970, and she was a cost accountant at **Messer Construction Co.** on a big project for **Procter & Gamble Co.** Strange was a co-op student on the job.

“Immediately, he started trying to boss me around,” said Daly, who had graduated from the **University of Dayton** two years earlier and worked in Chicago before landing the job at Messer.

Daly called him on it, and Strange told her there were two kinds of people in the world: people who built buildings and made money, and those who counted it. “We really did not get along,” she said.

Fast-forward 18 years. Strange and Daly both had risen through the ranks at Messer. Strange was trying to orchestrate a deal for employees to buy the firm from the Messer family. It was a Sunday, and the CPA working with Strange cut their talks short to go to a **Cincinnati Bengals** game. Daly’s home phone rang. It was Strange.

“He said, ‘I’m down on my knees in this phone booth begging,’” she recalled. “I need an accountant.”

Said Strange, “I learned in one fell swoop how to value people who were educated in accounting.”

So began the start of a new chapter at Messer and in the lives of Daly and Strange. Employees bought the company in 1990. Daly became chief financial officer. Strange became CEO. And the two became friends.

‘Those are big shoes to fill’

On March 1, Daly retired from Messer. Strange said she’ll be “of counsel” for the firm and will remain involved in various capacities. Thomas Keckeis, who worked with Daly and Strange to craft the employee buyout, said Messer had to divide up Daly’s responsibilities among three people when she left.



Kathy Daly

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“Those are big shoes to fill,” said Keckeis, who became CEO of Messer Construction March 1. “She really has changed our industry.”

Daly, after all, was CFO in an industry still dominated by white men. And Messer is not a little company. In fiscal 2009, the firm posted revenue of \$670 million. Her accomplishments are all the more remarkable in the context of the times. When Daly was hired in 1970, she answered a “Help Wanted – Men” ad in the newspaper. Women were supposed to be accounting clerks or secretaries or models, based on the ads for women.

But Daly changed that at Messer. She got the job, she learned later, because client P&G required the company to hire a degreed accountant and at least one woman and one black employee. After she proved herself, the Messer family invited her to work at the main office.

The only other women who worked for Messer then were secretaries and the assistant corporate secretary, who was a 70-something-year-old woman in charge of all the secretaries, known simply as “the girls.” The girls weren’t allowed to smoke; the men were. And the girls weren’t invited to the company Christmas party. Daly ate lunch by herself every day for about 10 years.

Working in main office, ahead of her time

It’s not that Messer was a bad place, Daly stressed. The fact that the family brought her into the main office was way ahead of the times, especially in construction.

“At our events, not only was I the only woman in the room, I was the only one who hadn’t been in World War II,” Daly said.

By 1974, she and all the other women who worked at Messer were included in the company Christmas party, after she complained that a young man who worked for her had been invited while she wasn’t. In 1978, she started the company’s first information technology department. She started Messer Women in Management in 1998. There were 30 women managers or professionals then. Now there are 84.

“She’s one of the people who have kind of shown the way to younger women,” said Charlene Ventura, CEO of the [YWCA of Greater Cincinnati](#), where Daly is an active volunteer. “She lifts as she climbs.”

And, long ago, she cured Messer of calling any employees “girls.”

“We’ve all heard 1,000 times, ‘We do not violate child labor laws,’” Strange said.

Now Daly, 63, is looking forward to less day-to-day responsibility, more time for travel and still plenty of engagement with the community and with her co-workers at Messer.

“I’m looking at this as I’m going on a month’s vacation,” said Daly, who left for Florida March 1. “You can’t be friends with people for 40 years and just walk away from them.”

lmay@bizjournals.com | (513) 337-9437