



DARLENE DAVIS

Chief financial officer, TLC Next Generation

BY GENE GORMAN

During her seven years auditing for Monsanto, Darlene Davis took one too many business trips.

"I fell asleep on a plane and woke up and, for two minutes, I didn't know where I was going," said Davis, now chief financial officer for TLC Next Generation, a retailer for Southwestern Bell cellular.

She joined TLC Next Generation about 18 months ago. She thought she could learn more about running a business by getting a closer look at the daily operation of a small company.

"This has been one of the most valuable experiences of my career," she said. "I am seeing the triumphs and defeats of running a business day-to-day. As CFO, you see it. You're in it. You're getting your hands dirty."

Davis, who oversees the company's operations, accounting and finances, said she dumped her "to do" lists early on. They were getting too shredded and going unchecked as more pressing, unforeseen items arose. After a while Davis realized that everything that needed to be done would get done if she just kept moving.

"On any given day, I could be meeting with executives from Southwestern Bell. I could be meeting with the bankers. I could be out at the stores," she said.

She half jokes about brawling with her boss, Leroy Wright, but stands by the principle that if two people who work together always agree, then one of them is probably not needed.

Wright said Davis learned quickly and earned the confidence of his company's small staff.

"You've got to have the core competency," he said. "But you have to be able to get people to follow you."

Davis earned an accounting degree from St. Louis University in 1989 and previously worked for Rubin, Brown, Gornstein & Co

Davis said working at the accounting firm and at Monsanto made her doubt whether she would get a chance to advance. Few of the people in positions of power had black, female faces, and she did not expect any dramatic changes in the near future.

"When I'm in a situation when I think there is a barrier, it kind of helps if you push more," she said.

Davis decided she would get more opportunities and better experience by accepting Wright's offer to become the CFO of his company. TLC Next Generation has nine stores in St. Louis, two in Kansas City and eight in San Diego. Davis said the company brings about 800 new cellular customers a month to Southwestern Bell and earns \$12 million annually.

She said she has enjoyed working in telecommunications, an industry that changes quickly.

"I didn't know anything about telecommunications," Davis said. "It could have been dog food: It was just something I could not pass up."

Darlene Green, comptroller for the city of St. Louis, became friends with Davis through the St. Louis chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants. Green said she expects Davis to use her current position to move toward her other professional goals.

"She's not done, yet," Green said. "She always has had a spirit of continuing to grow. She's definitely not afraid to break new ground."

Davis, who has a 3-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son, said her new title brought more responsibilities and challenges, but she feels like she has been able to balance her time between home and work.

"It becomes a lifestyle," she said. "You give yourself to the organization. The successes are so much more valuable. The failures are more personal."

Gene Gorman is a St. Louis free-lance writer

MOST INFLUENTIAL BUSINESS WOMEN IN ST. LOUIS 2000

Barbara Agatstein
Chief officer
head designer
Wee Ones Inc.

Barbara Bartley-Turkington
President
Newco Flooring Systems

Brenda Bauer
General Manager
Argosy's Alton Belle Casino

Mary Pat Blake
Senior vice president
Charter Communications

Angela Braly
Executive vice president
RightChoice Managed
Care Inc.

Darlene Davis
Chief financial officer
TLC Next Generation

Barb Dressel
Chief executive
Automark Marking Systems
Inc.

Pam Duffy
President
Rhodey & Son Construction

Mary Engelbreit
Illustrator and entrepreneur
The Mary Engelbreit Co.

Nancy Friedman
Owner
The Telephone Doctor

Juanita Hinshaw
Senior vice president,
chief financial officer
Graybar Electric

Constance Orchard Hoffman
President
Pulitzer Technologies

Jan Holloway
Chief information officer
Monsanto

Holly Huels
Senior vice president
Capital for Business

Suzanne Laubert
Co-founder and principal
Fister Laubert Inc.

Sally Lieble
President,
chief operating officer
Airport Terminal
Services Inc.

Linda Locke
Vice president,
technology communications
MasterCard

Jan Newton
President
Southwestern Bell-Missouri

Carolyn Pavelec
Chief executive
Bell Electrical Contractors
Inc.

Sister Mary Jean Ryan
President,
chief executive
SSM Health Care

Jill Schanzle
Vice president
Security Armored Car Inc.

Mary Sherrill
Vice chairman,
chief of bank operations
Southwest Bank of St. Louis

Connie Silverstein
Principal, banking services
Edward Jones

Patricia Whitaker
President,
chief executive
Arcturus

Laura Whitley
President
Private Bank Midwest
Bank of America

PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs in this special section were taken by
Brian Cassidy