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Family Business Profile: Sunset Transportation hits the road with second generation at the wheel

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Lindsey Graves remembers the phone always ringing at her home on Workbench Drive in Sunset Hills.

Her dad, Jim Williams, started trucking company Sunset Transportation in 1989 from the family's basement after spending the previous 18 years managing the fleet of trucks for his family's business, Williams Paper Co.

Sunset launched with two employees and served as an agent for small trucking carriers, helping them to ship clients' orders. Today, Sunset Transportation is one of St. Louis' largest privately held companies with \$187 million in revenue and more than 160 employees in offices in Nashville; Wisconsin; Minnesota; North Carolina; Michigan; and Mexico.



MICHAEL THOMAS FOR SLBJ

Lindsey Graves, CEO and majority owner of Sunset Transportation, took over the role in late 2020.

Graves, an only child, now leads the third-party logistics firm as CEO and was transferred majority ownership at the end of 2020. Williams is now chairman.

As she describes it, her addition to the company was as much a surprise to her as her ascension to the CEO role. And working in the family business tested both Graves and Williams.

"It was never easy working for my dad. I think it was frustrating for him, too," Graves said.

Graves joined the family business in the billing department in 2006 after graduating from the College of Charleston in South Carolina. Eventually, she became director of marketing and was asked to sit in on executive team meetings among her dad, CFO Mark Cammarata and COO Mick McGroary.

While Williams gave her freedom to do new things in her marketing role, like issue press releases, it was much more difficult for Graves to persuade him to make operational changes such as adopting new technology. Their dissimilar communication styles often made them seem like oil and water, she said.

"I had to be consistent and patient in proving myself to him," Graves said. "It took 10 years."

There was no official discussion between the first and second generations regarding a transition of ownership. Graves believes it's because her dad didn't want to create more pressure for her and her three children. But it's a role she gravitated to and worked toward over the years.

The process of transitioning ownership from Williams to Graves began in late 2020. Graves hired Pittsburgh-based Solenture to help with the transition, and the deal closed within a month in December. Williams and his wife retain minority ownership.

Graves' goal is to continue the family culture her dad initiated, which includes flexible schedules for employees, in addition to capitalizing on new business opportunities now possible because Sunset Transportation is woman-owned. The transportation industry is predominately led by men, where female executives make up a third of all executives in the logistics field, according to a 2019 survey from Women in Trucking Association and FreightWaves.

Recruiting will be crucial to Sunset Transportation's growth plans, Graves said. The company currently has 10 unfilled positions. Sunset moved into its new South County headquarters, a 45,000-square-foot space at 10877 Watson Road, in 2020 to accommodate that growth.

Despite the expansion, Sunset still operates with a family-like culture cultivated by Williams.

"I want him to be proud of me, and I want to succeed in his eyes," Graves said.