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SPORTS B1

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Not just a cliché

Couple engineers small business

BUSINESS A6



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Contracting work comes up diamonds for Woodland couple

By CRYSTAL LEE
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Spencer Defty, owner of Diamond D General Engineering in Woodland, is well aware of clichés but he can't help using them to describe his life.

He is a self-taught contractor who learned everything he knows on the job working for someone else's company. To keep busy and earn extra cash, Defty started moonlighting in the evenings and on weekends. In 1992, he incorporated his own general engineering business. His company, up until 1997, consisted of himself and two other employees.

His wife, Laura Defty, is a self-taught business manager who learned everything she knows from working in the office of Baldoni Construction, her father's grading and paving company in Auburn. She figured out how other businesses organized their administrative files and tailored the methods for Baldoni.

Married now for 12 years, the Deftys live on a ranch just outside of Woodland with their three kids and work in an office set up on the property just 100 yards from the house.

"It sounds like a cliché, but we are kind of the quintessential small, family-owned business," Spencer said. "And we do really think of our employees as an extended family as well."

Diamond D employs 30 people year-round, including project managers, estimators and field workers. This summer, however, the company will probably take on about 20 seasonal hires — the most they have ever had, Spencer said.

The company's growth stems from Spencer's belief in good, old-fashioned hard work and honesty.

"I had always told myself that if a guy just went out there and did an honest day's work and charged a fair price, that you could make a good living at this business," Spencer said.

When he started doing part-time work in 1989, Spencer bought an 18-horse-power, 4-

wheel-drive tractor from a local dealer and secured jobs in the agriculture industry. He cleaned ditches and built retention ponds for farmers.

"From there, it started to evolve. What we found is that we had a good market, however, the agriculture industry doesn't really lend itself to high wage and a high level of employee benefits," Spencer said. "In order to retain our employees, we really had to diversify our portfolio out to more mainstream construction."

Diamond D is now a certified heavy civil construction, or engineering, company that performs excavation, earthmoving, paving and habitat restoration work with clients that include the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Federal Highway Administration and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

But Diamond D still does what it can to service the agriculture industry. An ongoing relationship with the Yolo County Flood Control & Water Conservation District, one of their "anchor clients," allows Diamond D to do work such as emergency repairs at the Capay Dam in 2003 and the Moore Siphon in 2005 which local farmers relied on for watering crops.

"They needed it (fixed) within a 10-day window or they would start losing these freshly planted tomatoes," Spencer said. Diamond D finished the project within seven days.

The company's emphasis on quality customer service and commitment to employees hasn't gone unnoticed. In 2006, Diamond D received the Sacramento Metro Chamber's Small Minority-Owned Business award and, this year, received the Golden Spike Award from Sacramento Regional Transit for retrofitting three RT stations for handicap access.

"We've evolved from working for the local farmer to now, we're doing work for the federal government," Spencer said. "You know that old cliché, you've got to pinch yourself to see if it's all true. That our little business has grown to where it is. ... We just feel very fortunate."