

# Innovation the key for A.P. Reid

By Terry Waterfield

**T**wenty-five years ago, Aileen Reid made a decision that would change her life, quit her job and went into business for herself. At the time, Reid, a single mother, was working as a secretary for an insurance firm, a job she had



JAMIE AND AILEEN REID AT THE HEAD OFFICE IN DARTMOUTH, NS

held since graduating from secretarial school in 1972. So, in 1980, Aileen started the business by borrowing with her credit cards. In the early going, she barely made enough to cover rent, transportation and child care for her four-year-old son, Jamie.

At the end of the first year she had 12 customers. Today, Reid's business, A. P. Reid Insurance Stores Limited, has more than 40 employees, a head office and retail service office in Dartmouth, NS, eight branch offices in Nova Scotia and one on Prince Edward Island, writing \$15 million of business each

year. The company's current customer base totals more than 10,000 and includes large firms such as Sobeys's, Michelin, Nova Scotia Tourism and Survival Systems.

Now 50, Aileen has turned the day-to-day operation over to son Jamie, but still stays heavily involved with the business as the firm's president and CEO. It was a natural progression for Jamie, who often accompanied his mother on business-calls in the early days. "I dragged him everywhere," she recalls. "He was brought up in the public eye of my clients. Some even feel personally responsible for his turning out so well." Aileen remembers working nights, with Jamie doing the filing for his mother.

Now, Jamie's wife also works with the company, as does Aileen's brother Lauren. As Jamie explains it, the company grew because of a willingness to innovate. Nineteen years ago, Ms. Reid developed a group insurance program for the Investment Property Owners Association, one of the first such plans in Nova Scotia.

When approached by a group of portable sawmill owners who were not happy with the way they were being treated by the insurance industry, Ms. Reid formed Woodchuck Insurance and insured them. Prior to that, the portable sawmill owners were being treated the same as large sawmills.

When shown a picture of the portable sawmill, Ms. Reid replied: "That's not a sawmill," and was soon insuring portable sawmill

owners. An article in Wood Wizer Magazine, published by the world's largest portable sawmill manufacturer, resulted in insurance sales across Canada and into the United States. Along the way Ms. Reid was named on of the top 50 CEOs in Atlantic Canada and was a regional finalist for Earnst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year, and honour she has been nominated for again this year. Chatelaine has named the firm on of the 100 best women owned businesses in Canada.

While she is not as heavily involved in the day-to-day operation, Aileen is still a busy person. As President and CEO of the company, she still has a long list of duties connected with the firm.

But, with Jamie taking over more and more duties, she has more time for other things, such as babysitting Jamie's son and daughter, and gardening, and can be found in the garden early most mornings before going to work. The reasons for A. P. Reid's great success is spelled out in President Aileen's message on the company web site:

"We are responsible to our customers, our insurers, to our employees and to the community we serve. Our interaction with all segments of our industry must reflect the high standards we profess.

"Since the future of our Company rests squarely on the knowledge, imagination, skills, teamwork and integrity of our employees, we value these qualities most highly, and because our employees have such a foundation, we will expect excellent performance and dedication to their jobs; but we will earn their loyalty by providing an environment by which their imagination, teamwork and integrity will be valued." ■