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BUSINESS

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Workplace pizazz



Blandon site preparation firm draws out creativity at the office

Deb Schlouch, co-owner of Schlouch Inc., builds images, using bold colors and tapping on past experiences. Other employees are encouraged to bring their art with them.

By Julia F. Nazimov
Reading Eagle correspondent

Creativity isn't usually the first attribute you would associate with a company that prepares construction sites.

But at Schlouch Inc., Blandon, encouraging creativity is a central management tenet.

"Everything is about supporting creativity and team growth," Barry Schlouch said.

Much of this emphasis on creative thinking is due to Deborah Schlouch, co-owner of the company, with her husband, Barry.

Deb, as she prefers to be called, is an accomplished artist whose paintings are featured on walls throughout company headquarters, and whose eye for color has helped design a workplace awash in it.

"When I started hanging my stuff here, it started a whole conversation about art," said Deb, who lives with her family in Wyomissing.

Those conversations revealed that other employees enjoyed painting in their spare time, and some of their work has also begun to grace the walls at Schlouch.

Deb's works, however, are not the typical decorative, but bland, still lifes and landscapes commonly found on corporate office walls.

She uses bold colors and surreal or abstract images, some of them dark and disturbing, but all visually arresting, challenging the viewer to think.

The fact that Barry is unafraid to display Deb's work, and to encourage his employees to share theirs, is symbolic of his unconventional approach to business in general.

Schlouch Inc.'s name appeared on the list of the best large companies to work for in Pennsylvania in 2000.

Schlouch's first job was a \$15,000 assignment in 1983 to prepare a site for Wendy's Restaurant, West Reading. Today, Schlouch has more than \$50 million in annual revenues.

Barry Schlouch outlined his philosophy for management. He said he prefers to be called a coordinator, because the title of supervisor implies the need to exert power and control.

"When I started this company in 1983, I tried to run it like a regular business, but the more I tried to do that, the more unhappy I became," he said.



Reading Eagle: James I. Cuccinelli

Deb Schlouch's reflection, above, appears in a mirror she made of copper. The lamp also was created by the accomplished artist and local businesswoman. The image, top right, speaks for the sometimes disturbing artwork Schlouch displays in her Blandon office.

Deb Schlouch

Born: 1959.

Married: to Barry Schlouch for 26 years.

Self-taught artist: Studied at Reading Area Community College; Kutztown University; Baum Art School, Allentown; continuing study at Wyomissing Institute of Art and Taos Institute of Art, Taos, N.M.

Exhibits: Solo exhibit at Montserrat Gallery, Soho, New York, 1999; Salon 2000 show at Linner Gallery, New York, January and March 2000; 70th spring open juried exhibition at National Art League, Douglaston, N.Y., May 2000; featured artist in Fractured Families Exhibit, Open Space Gallery, Allentown, March 2001; Berks Art Alliance juried art exhibition at Reading Public Museum, July 2001. Ongoing exhibit of her work at Schlouch Inc. headquarters; featured in *Kalliope*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, a women's literature and art journal, November 2001.

Web site: www.debschlouch.com.



In a conference room of Schlouch Inc., co-owner Deb Schlouch sits among some of her work.

Pizazz continues on C2

Avoid scams asking to use your account for transfers



Michelle Singletary
The color of money

NEARLY EVERY DAY I get an e-mail from someone who is eager to do business with me.

I must keep the deal strictly confidential, I'm implored. Most recently, I was contacted by Kenneth Oshodi, who claimed to be a member of the "special committee on project implementation for the Nigerian National Petroleum Corp."

Oshodi wanted me to allow him to transfer \$21.5 million into my bank account. For that simple task, I was to be paid 20 percent of the \$21.5 million, which he said is surplus govern-

ment money that was earmarked for some contract.

Oh, and if I called Oshodi I was instructed to use the code words, "good luck."

"Good luck to you buddy if you think I'm falling for this scam," I said to myself.

I keep getting different versions of this same scheme. Anthony Allen sent me an e-mail claiming to be a branch manager at the Orient Bank of Nigeria. Allen wanted me to pretend to be the next of kin of a deceased oil consultant so the \$25 million left in the man's bank account could be transferred to my U.S. account. If I helped him, I could keep 40 percent of the money.

Most people see these e-mails for what they are — attempts by low-life criminals to con them out of their personal funds.

And yet far too many people have fallen for the Nigerian scams. So many, in fact, that the U.S. Secret Service and other law enforcement agencies around the country have beefed

up efforts to curb this particular crime.

This con is called 419 after the section of the Nigerian penal code that addresses fraudulent schemes.

The solicitations can come via e-mail, fax or letter. The letter writer inevitably requests that you provide a bank account number to complete the transaction. The most prevalent and successful cases of the Nigerian con are the so-called fund transfer scams.

In one variation of this scheme, according to the Secret Service, a company or individual will typically receive a letter or e-mail from a Nigerian claiming to be a senior civil servant. In the letter, the Nigerian will inform the recipient that he is seeking a reputable foreign company or individual into whose account he can deposit funds ranging from \$10 million to \$60 million that the Nigerian government overpaid on a procurement contract.

Rather than return the mon-

ey to the government, they want you to help them transfer the money to your bank account, for which you will receive a commission.

However, people who agree to participate in the scheme will be required to pay upfront an assortment of fees to cover bogus bribes, legal fees and travel expenses. Bingo — bye, bye money.

Law enforcement officials believe victims are losing \$100 million a year as a result of this fraud.

Now, I've made my share of money mistakes in my life. My purse was stolen a year ago and some creep, pretending to be a manager at my bank, conned me into divulging my bank personal identification number. He stole \$600 out of my checking account.

Giving up my PIN was a stupid mistake. I should have known better. But I was upset and lost my mind for a moment.

I know how easy it is to be conned.

And yet there are some cons you know good and well are illegal, dishonest or at the very least suspect. No one should have to tell you to stay away from those schemes. That's a lesson you should have learned from your mama, daddy or whoever raised you.

In many respects this Nigerian 419 fraud is no different than some thug walking up to you in a shopping center parking lot and offering to sell you some watches or gold chains. You know, or at least suspect, the jewelry is stolen. Buy it and you are in possession of stolen goods — a crime itself.

It's the same thing with the Nigerian scam. The letter writers often brazenly acknowledge that they are trying to transfer ill-gotten money.

This scam could just as easily be any scheme in which someone wants you to do something questionable so that you may profit.

For example, a lot of people in debt are conned by credit re-

pair firms that promise to create a new and improved credit identity for them. For a fee, the firms offer to help these people obtain a federal employer identification number to use instead of a Social Security number.

If you don't own a business, how would this be a legitimate way to repair your personal credit history? It's dishonest — not to mention a federal crime — to obtain an employer identification number from the Internal Revenue Service under false pretenses. Just like it would be deceitful, not to mention illegal, to accept Nigerian government money even if the e-mail offers were real.

Clearly, there are many cons that victimize innocent people. But for schemes such as the Nigerian scam, you may be a victim, but you certainly aren't innocent.

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Deb Schlouch, in the stairway of her Wyomissing home, creates her artwork at home.

PIZZAZZ | Firm draws out creativity at the office

Continued from C1

Realizing he needed to make changes in how he operated his business, he tried to provide ways for his employees to communicate their concerns and feelings about issues that affected the business.

He started a series of sessions called Team Encounters to bring employees together for those kinds of talks.

The concept made some employees in this predominantly male workplace uncomfortable, and even led a few to leave.

But it has become an ingrained part of the business and has been expanded to include customers and families of employees.

Deb admitted she also was unhappy in the early years of the company's growth, battling a variety of personal problems.

"I didn't feel good about myself," she said.

Some of the darker themes in her earlier work reflect that — abuse, religious and cultural control and censorship. One painting shows a broken heart in chains.

Eyes and hands are recurrent themes in her work, often outsized and dominating the paintings.

"I can tell a lot from people's eyes and hands," she said.

Her earlier work, she said, was cathartic, helping her deal with the unhappiness in her life. Her more recent

paintings are more abstract, with bolder, brighter colors reflecting a more optimistic mood.

Deb's interest in art goes way back.

"I've been drawing since I was a little kid," she said.

Even when the company was in its early years and she was more involved in day-to-day operations, she pursued her talent through going to workshops and galleries, reading and trying to learn as much as she could about art.

She continues to study at the Wyomissing Institute of Art and the Taos Institute of Art, Taos, N.M. But she considers herself, to a great extent, self-taught.

Her talent has brought her recognition beyond the walls of Schlouch's headquarters.

She had her first solo show in 1999 at the Monserrat Gallery in New York City, and has had pieces featured at the National Women's Caucus for Art in Chicago and in an exhibit, Fractured Families at the Open Space Gallery in Allentown.

She paints pretty much full time now, but still assists with the Team Encounter sessions and was heavily involved in interior design of the most recent addition at company headquarters.

"She really has added so much to the environment," Barry said.

■ Contact correspondent Julia F. Nazimov at 610-371-5049 or business@readingeagle.com.



Two people locking horns and a woman with half of her face in shadow are among the works of Deb Schlouch, co-owner of Schlouch Inc., Blandon.

Schlouch Inc.

Business: Specializes in construction site work, including earthwork, grading, utilities, blasting, curbing, paving, soil and erosion control and complete site design for both residential and commercial developments.

History: Started in 1983 by Barry and Deborah "Deb" Schlouch in the basement of their home in Shoemakersville. Moved out of there after two years to another location in Shoemakersville. Moved into headquarters in 1989; have added onto it twice.

Location: Excelsior Industrial Park, P.O. Box 69, Blandon 19510. Lehigh Valley office, 700 Savage Road, Suite 5, Northampton, Pa. 18067.

Phone: 610-926-7070 for Berks and 610-502-0966 for Lehigh Valley office.

Employees: 350-plus.

Equipment: More than 160 pieces of excavation and hauling equipment.

Sales: \$50 million in business per year.

Some 2002 projects: Three residential projects for Forino developers, in Berks County, including Sunset Knoll, a 98-lot development on Blacksmith Road in Amity Township, where Schlouch is handling clearing, survey, stakeout, earthwork, sanitary and storm sewers, water line, sediment/erosion control, seeding and grading for roads; selected by L&K Construction Inc. of Pottsville to prepare a site for Berman Freightliner at North Pointe Business Center in Ontelaunee Township; commercial and residential site development project in Chester, Lehigh, Montgomery and Northampton counties.

Awards: Chosen one of the best large companies to work for in Pennsylvania in 2000.