

Excellence Award Winner

Nicole Stuart

PRESIDENT » TOP GUARD SECURITY » HAMPTON

Top Guard is Hampton Roads' largest woman-owned business. It provides private security services.

When did you start the business and what gave you the idea for it?

Top Guard was founded in 1996. My father started a similar successful business in the industry in the early 1970s, so I suppose entrepreneurship and security were in my genes.

What was the hardest part of launching your company?

In the beginning it was being taken seriously in an industry that historically had been male from top to bottom. With a lot of hard work and a little tenacity I was able to overcome the stereotypes pretty quickly.

What lesson did you learn that you wish you'd known back before you started?

How crucial specialized consultants can be in overcoming business challenges.

What risks did you take?

The largest risk I took was deciding to specialize in high-quality, customer service-oriented security. Top Guard turned down work that didn't meet certain criteria. We could have serviced a higher volume of clients in the early years but they weren't the right clients for the type of company I wanted to build. We went with quality services over quantity and it helped us gain the reputation we have today of providing the area's highest-quality security officers for top-notch clients.

What was the biggest obstacle you overcame?

Our industry had traditionally been dominated by national firms, so getting our foot in the door was a challenge at first, but eventually our reputation for high-quality service brought clients to us.

What or who has helped you the most in establishing your business?

My father set a wonderful example for me of the responsibilities that come with business ownership.

What do you consider your greatest innovation?

An online quality-assurance program for clients led to the single largest contractual award in the history of our firm. I hatched the idea during a brainstorming session.

How has the company grown, both in terms of employees and revenues?

We expanded from approximately 130 employees to over 550 in just a few years. Revenues have of course followed suit.

Has the company earned a profit? If so, how long did it take to get there?

We have been blessed to earn a profit from the be-

ginning by being selective in the type of work we accepted.

Discuss future plans for the company.

We have just leased an office in Richmond.

What is your biggest challenge now and how do you plan to handle it?

We are a high-quality value provider, just the type of firm that has flourished in the last decade, so despite some clients needing to push costs downward, we look to weather the storm by sticking to our first-class support of our clients and officers. ■



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