

a mission to do business with minority vendors. But progress was slow. "There were nights I didn't sleep," she says. "At one point, I called my bank and said, 'Please, can you float us so we can make payroll? Please?' The banker said, 'Tillie, this is the last time.' And it was." The first year she took over, the business turned a small profit.

But as the company recovered, Hidalgo Lima's marriage struggled. "Dave was my greatest cheerleader," she says. "He believed I had it in me to become CEO. But he also felt unhappy about no longer being part of the team. He was working on consulting projects. I couldn't talk to him about the business for fear of hurting his feelings, and at home I was still doing the grocery shopping and all the cooking." One night, she straggled in after 8 PM, hungry, exhausted and loaded down with her briefcase and laptop. Dave and their three daughters were watching TV. They smiled at her and asked, "What's for dinner?"

Hidalgo Lima carried her resentment around for months, until she insisted that she and Dave go for couples therapy. "It was amazing," she says.



"I had to be stern and direct and establish myself as a force," Hansen recalls. "I had to let people know, 'I'm not going away.' This is what women have to do in business."

"We learned to communicate better, and we've completely reversed roles. He does all the shopping, and when I get home, dinner is ready."

In 2010, Best Upon Request paid off its SBA loan. The company now employs more than 100 people at over

200 client locations in 12 states. Hidalgo Lima has received many honors, including the 2008 Brillante Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence from the National Society of Hispanic MBAs. Two of her daughters have joined the business. "I'm very proud of the company. There's energy and a positive outlook here," says Hidalgo Lima, who likes to think that her CEO title stands for chief encouragement officer. "But lots of people helped me. There's no way I could have done this alone."



^ SANDY HANSEN, 39

From | Insurance Agent

To | Feed-Store Owner

Sandy Hansen had been married for less than 15 months when she lost her husband, Randy, to leukemia. Days after the funeral, Hansen, an insurance agent living in Watkins, Minnesota, sat at Randy's desk, went through the financial paperwork and saw for the first time that her husband's animal-feed store, AgVenture Feed & Seed, had racked up almost \$500,000 in debt, much of it secured by the equity in their home. "There was no way I could have sold the business and broken even," she says.

She decided to fight to turn the company around. "I'm going to try to learn the business," Hansen told the staff, "and we'll work things out." She extended the leave of absence she'd taken from the insurance job and headed to AgVenture every day, her stomach in knots. "I kept wondering, Would this be the day that we have to declare bankruptcy?" she says. With no background in the business and no idea why it was doing so poorly, she

spent hours with an accountant and a banker, trying to figure out ways to make the store more efficient. The company had always ground most of its own feed, a costly process, so she decided to eliminate that step and sell preground feed. She began to contract out some parts of the business, such as deliveries. "I made it up as I went along," she says. She never let on to the farmers who shopped at the store that she was near bankruptcy, never told her parents or siblings what was happening. The experience reminded her of an undergraduate internship she'd had at a nonprofit. "My boss threw me into roles where I was completely lost. But I always got the job done," she says. "That taught me to take limited information and just go for it."

Hansen soon discovered that some of her freelance sales representatives were selling feed directly to farmers, which was cutting into her business. Hansen invited the reps (all men), one by one, to her back office for a chat and let them know flat out that this would not be tolerated: "I had to be stern and direct and establish myself as a force. I had to let people know, 'I'm not going away.' This is what women have to do in business. We have to work twice as hard as men to establish credibility, and only then do we get to play in the game. But in the end, being a woman is a blessing because once you establish yourself, you stand out."

Since Hansen took over in 2003 (she quit her insurance job in 2004), she's paid off all of AgVenture's debt. It took three years of nearly 24/7 devotion to stabilize the business, but annual revenues have risen from \$1.4 million to \$4 million. Hansen donates at least 10 percent of her profits (and 10 percent of her personal wages) to local charities each year, leading the community to root for her success. "Some huge miracles have happened because I had to take over the business," says Hansen. "That I had the tenacity to get through this is a miracle in itself." *

ANDREA ATKINS, a frequent contributor to national magazines, lives in Rye, New York.