



Kathy Clark

CEO of Clark Moving and Storage, Inc.

*"For every failure, there is an alternative course of action; you just have to find it. When you come to a road block, take a detour."
Mary Kay Ash*

Kathy Clark's turning point is one that many people can share and sympathize with.

In March of 1998, at the age of 42, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Although a diagnosis as serious as cancer always tends to bring about big changes, it was the changes that her sickness forced upon her professional life that were the most significant to Kathy. Until that point, Kathy had been trying to live out two extremes: a business owner overseeing her company, and someone who actually performed the job duties of every role in the company. After being forced to step back and let others assume some of the responsibility during her treatment, she has found a new level of enjoyment and satisfaction with her work.

In order to understand exactly how Kathy got to this point, though, we have to look back at her origins and upbringing. She was born into a family that owned its own business, a company based in Syracuse, NY called Material Handling Products. She was the youngest of three siblings with two

older brothers. Though it had always just been naturally assumed that one of her brothers would be the one to take over the family business, this did not lessen Kathy's aspirations any. She set a goal from a very young age, a dream of owning her own business before she was thirty.

Certainly, Kathy's home life was one that supported this kind of ambition. Growing up with two older brothers, she naturally felt a sense of competition and the desire to try and emulate them. Her parents supported this, telling her that anything the two boys did, she could also do if that was her desire. As a result, she never felt inhibited or restrained at all because of her gender. In fact, it was during a particularly adventurous outing involving skydiving that she met Rich Clark, who would one day become her husband!

When Kathy went on to college, she would experience what at the time appeared to be something of a temporary setback. Because of her zestful approach to life she became preoccupied with too much partying and flunked out in her sophomore year. Not eager to face her parents, who were none too pleased at this turn of events, she went to live with a friend in Rochester. How she came to this decision is fairly interesting. From a young age, she had always felt a somewhat mysterious calling to the area. She recalls being enchanted by the yellow Kodak boxes that would arrive at her home carrying slides ordered by her father, an amateur photographer. The city of Rochester always held a mystique for her that she never quite understood, so she jumped at the chance to move there when the opportunity presented itself.

Looking for work, Kathy placed an application with a temp agency, who quickly found her work with the Mayflower agency, a moving company. Though at first her only job was to file papers and perform other clerical style work, her attitude eventually caught the attention of management who decided to give her a shot in the sales department. As it turns out, Kathy took to this quite naturally. She says that rather than feeling inhibited because of being a woman, it actually made it easier for her to get ahead. The uncommon sight of a woman in door to door sales allowed her to get her

foot in the door a lot easier and seemed to command attention. In her own words:

"You have to find something that gives you the advantage, and when you find it, take advantage of it until it goes away."

Take advantage she did. Within just a short amount of time, Kathy was one of the top salespeople in the company and had a huge list of customer accounts that she did constant business with. It was with shock then, that she came to her workplace one day in 1985 to find that the front gates were padlocked and the place was deserted. It had shut down literally overnight. Not wanting to disappoint the customer base that she had worked so hard to build up, Kathy went immediately to a phone booth and began making calls to her competitors to find someone who could fill the needs of her customers, so that they wouldn't be left out in the cold. Her next move was to call those customers directly, explain what had happened, and make sure they were taken care of.

Kathy spoke with Mayflower who gave her permission to open a temporary office in the area, with the agreement that they would send people from the corporate office within a week to interview managers from local competitors, to see who would be best suited to take over the new office. When they were not able to find anyone, Kathy suggested that she might be the right person for the job. Although she wasn't taken seriously until she enlisted the help of her husband, who had a background in electrical engineering and flight instruction, she eventually became the franchisee of Mayflower and achieved the dream of owning her own business before she was 30 years old.

That was when the real work began for her. She would go into work at 4AM to get things in order for the rest of the day. When the crew began to arrive at 7AM, they would work and place calls until around 5PM, at which point she would don work clothes and help the others paint and wire up the office, to make it more presentable to customers.

It cannot be said that Kathy is a stranger to hard work. In fact, it was during this time that she first began to realize **that there's such a thing as too much work**. She recalls that like many young entrepreneurs, she was afraid to say "no" to clients, even if she thought she couldn't handle the job they were offering. One day, she ended up losing a very large client because of this, and learned the valuable lesson that one can't do everything by oneself.

This lesson really sank in after her diagnosis with cancer.

As Kathy was lying on the operating table waiting to go under, she realized that she was preoccupied with the thought of phone calls she'd have to make the next day and suddenly came to the realization that she needed to take a few steps back.

Recalling how her insistence on doing it all had once inhibited her company when they lost that big client, she saw that she was inhibiting the growth of the company now by not allowing her workers the autonomy and freedom to make mistakes.

Nowadays, Kathy has matured into the true picture of a business owner. She takes joy in watching her workers grow and develop, as she is able to guide them and trust them to get the job done, rather than try to be a one-woman corporation in and of herself. It wasn't until this turning point that Kathy really began to see her position for what it was, and was finally able to truly enjoy the success that she had earned.