



Illustration: Samuel Fontanez

SHE MEANS BUSINESS

Business savvy coupled with hometown pro bono work is a potent combination for lighting designer Faith Baum

In 2004, Faith Baum and business partner Ken Douglas founded Illumination Arts. Just five years later, the Bloomfield, NJ, design firm has chalked up an impressive list of more than 60 project credits that include bridges, commercial office buildings, houses of worship, museum exhibits and hotels. Earlier this year, the firm scored IES Illumination Awards of Merit for the lighting design of the Biloxi Bay Bridge and the National Audubon Society Headquarters, while projects on the boards include a new K-8 school in Paterson, NJ; a control theater for the Long Island Rail Road; and the 6-mile I-74 Mississippi River Bridge and Corridor through Iowa and Illinois.

That, in 100 words or less, is the “art” of Illumination Arts. Now to the business of the business. From the outset, the plan called for Baum to be the majority shareholder, and the firm has leveraged its certification by state and local agencies throughout the northeast as a Women-Owned Business Enterprise (WBE), Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) and a Small Business Enterprise (SBE) to position itself for a number of public projects. Baum’s acumen hasn’t gone unnoticed. This past spring, she was selected as one of the “50 Best Women in Business” by the magazine *NJBiz*.

Don’t get the idea that it’s been all work for Baum over the past five years. Well, maybe it has been, but some of that work has been of the pro bono nature. By literally taking the job home with her, Baum has participated in several beautification projects in her hometown of Maplewood, NJ. She discusses the business and pleasure of lighting—at work and at home.

LD+A: *What’s been the biggest surprise and source of satisfaction over the past five years at Illumination Arts?*

Baum: Though I knew that starting a new business was the right thing to do, the actual fact of doing it was terrifying. But there were two huge surprises waiting for me on the other side of that decision. One was the fact that I never looked back, even when we were still trying to get on our feet. The second was the realization that my business partner, Ken Douglas, and I were so perfectly matched. Though we’d worked to-

gether for 17 years (at Mintz Lighting Group) before starting IA, owning a business was quite different. In that context, we discovered that we each had strengths that complemented the other's. Even after almost six years, we're still pleasantly surprised when we realize how well we achieve that balance. For example, we're getting started on a huge project right now and Ken has been bringing his amazing software skills to the table to get us up and running on a new system for file creation and sharing. In the meantime, I've been spending a lot of time on business development and marketing. We both know where we can be most effective, and the assignments just naturally fall into place.

Ken and I had a vision for our business. For our staff, we wanted to create a sense of family, a place where everyone felt comfortable and we were all working toward a common goal. For our clients, we wanted to create a business where we focused on our tagline: "Creativity. Experience. Collaboration." Each time a client calls us to do another project or they refer us to someone else, I get great satisfaction from realizing that we've created the kind of business we envisioned.

LD+A: What prompted IA to register for WBE/SBE/DBE certification? Was this the plan from day one?

Baum: Ken and I founded IA on the premise that I would be the majority shareholder and we would be a Women-Owned Business Enterprise. We had experience in both public and private projects, and knew that certification would allow us to of-

fer that added benefit to our clients. While we adamantly maintain that certification is not a replacement for good design, our clients can use our certifications to meet set-aside requirements on public projects. I believe that there is only one project we were awarded *because* of our certification, but we certainly have made things easier for many of our clients by having that certification.

LD+A: Tell us about the "Best 50 Women in Business" Award.

Baum: *NJBiz* is the preeminent weekly business magazine in New Jersey. Its "50 Best Women in Business Award" recognizes women who have made significant accomplishments in their industry, who give back to their personal and professional communities and who are seen as advocates for women. The awardees are selected by an independent three-judge panel using a blind evaluation system. I was incredibly honored to receive the award and thrilled to have our entire staff at the ceremony to celebrate our success.

LD+A: You have also worked on some volunteer beautification projects in Maplewood, NJ.

Baum: Over the past five years, I've been approached several times by members of my community, asking for help in beautifying or upgrading the lighting in a particular building. It started when my younger daughter was in elementary school, where a "guerrilla parent group" was formed to redesign the library. The money wasn't in the school budget, and the only way to make it happen was for the parents

to do all the work—including the construction—without official approval from the school district. The result was a beautiful new library facility with lots of different spaces where students, teachers and library staff can teach, learn and study.

I also worked with an ad hoc committee of community members who had raised money to refurbish the 50-year-old murals in the Town Hall. The eight murals were being removed and restored one by one, and as the first few were reinstalled, it became clear that they deserved to be properly illuminated. In addition to the lighting design, our pro bono services included presentations to the Township Committee and local preservationists to gain approval for the installation.

LD+A: You mention your experience in explaining the "ephemeral qualities of lighting design" to lay audiences? Do you think this happens enough in our industry?

Baum: We all know how hard lighting is to explain to lay people. Mock-ups and demonstrations can go very far in illustrating our intent to a client or stakeholders. Oftentimes, there is not enough time or money in the budget to make that happen, but when it does, it can change the course of a project. A few years ago, I was at a meeting of about 75 community stakeholders for a signature bridge project we were designing. Several community members were determined to have a highly illuminated bridge, which would have been unnecessary and inappropriate



As part of her pro bono work, Baum designed lighting for murals in the Maplewood Town Hall and made presentations to town officials to get the project approved.

given its location along the ocean in the middle of a state park.

At the beginning of my presentation, I showed them a very small light

source in the brightly illuminated presentation room. As expected, it was ineffective. I then turned off the lights and talked to them about light

and about their bridge while their eyes adjusted to the darkness. When I turned on the light source again, I was able to illuminate every table in the room. The epiphany for the group was the understanding that context was critical to making appropriate decisions about lighting. We were then able to design a beautiful and environmentally appropriate lighting solution for the bridge. We rarely have the opportunity to provide such demonstrations, but I believe that doing so more often would eliminate surprises for the client and save them money and time in the long run.

–Paul Tarricone