

Livonia co. designing mechanical system for Wings Arena

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(Photo: Submitted)

Sellinger Associates Inc. of Livonia, a consulting engineering firm that specializes in designing mechanical systems for buildings, has been in business since 1996. Currently, it is part of the team that is working on the design for the Detroit Event Center/Red Wings Arena, in Detroit.

Lisa Sellinger, corporate secretary, answered the following questions about the business of which her husband, Michael, is president:

Tell us about your business, including the types of services and/or products you feature.

Our expertise includes heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC); plumbing and fire protection designs for commercial buildings. Our clients are usually architects, but occasionally we work for contractors and universities directly such as WSU and EMU. Locally, we've provided engineering design services for Angela Hospice, Marywood, Comerica Bank and currently we are working on the Marycrest project on Middlebelt Road. Our local work also includes providing commissioning services to Livonia Public Schools.

Also, we are very excited to be part of the team that is working on the design for the Detroit Event Center/Red Wings Arena, in Detroit. For this prestigious project we are working with the latest 3-D Autocad software to create the mechanical drawings for the arena and ancillary buildings in the complex. Our role is to design mechanical systems that will be part of a facility visited by countless people from around the state and country!

What makes your business unique?

With less than two years' experience, the firm that Michael worked for prior to starting our own firm, was designing the mechanical systems for a 28-story highrise office tower in Honolulu. The architect was the famous Minoru Yamasaki and this building was one of the last projects he designed. There was speculation that another highrise was in the works by a local Honolulu architect and Mike's boss surmised that if he opened an office in Honolulu, there was a good chance to work with that team as well.

The boss talked with his senior engineers about relocating to Honolulu for one year to manage an office there, but they were not interested. He then, very nonchalantly asked Mike if this would interest him. Mike was a bit taken aback, as basically he was a rookie; however he said, "Yes I am interested!" The boss then said, straight-faced, "Can you be on a plane in three days"? It took about five minutes before Mike agreed but with one condition: He insisted that his girlfriend come along as well. The boss agreed, but proposed his own deal that Lisa had to be involved in marketing the new firm. Again, the request was agreed to, resulting in a decision that ultimately nurtured an entrepreneurial spirit in both of us ... and the rest is history!

For close to 20 years now, we have worked side by side with an incredible staff, building a business that provides excellent design services; has weathered economic downturns; and for a relatively small firm, has worked on prestigious projects with major firms in the local area as well as many from out of state. We are invested in Livonia, having raised our children here; developing and owning the building that our office is in; and employing outstanding people that are citizens of Livonia – many having grown up here.

How did you first decide to open your own business?

The decision to open our own business was made when Mike realized that the firms he was and had been working for were asking him to basically run their operations, without the compensation, retirement plan, or benefits of ownership. We knew that everything he was doing for his current employer, he could do as well and quite possibly better, on his own and the potential at that time, for creating a retirement nest egg, was far greater being self-employed than working for another firm. We felt that the time was right for us, even though we were just starting our family and had zero savings, to take a chance and go into business. In this consulting engineering world you basically only need a computer, a PE (professional engineer license) and some courage to begin. We had nothing, really, to lose and everything to gain ... including some major headaches along the way, but that we expected from time to time.

How did you decide to locate in Livonia?

When we started Sellinger Associates in 1996, we owned a home in Livonia and had two young children, then 4 and 2 years old. We wanted to limit drive time for Mike to ensure that he had as much time as possible with our family, so we began this adventure in an office in our basement! That was fine until the curious questions from a busy 2-year-old made working a bit challenging and resulted in Mike moving into a space in a colleague's office where

things began to grow. After a year in this shared space, we moved into an office on Schoolcraft, near Farmington Road and four years later our business moved to the current address in Livonia: 19821 Farmington Road.

Do you have a funny tidbit or story to share with our readers about your experience so far as a small business owner?

About six months after starting SAI, we were vacationing in Northern Michigan and Mike was feeling anxious about the business he had left in the hands of his able receptionist, so he felt compelled to call and check in. This was before cell phones, so we went looking for – and found! – a pay phone to make the call. Mike called the office and, with pen and paper in hand, waited to collect the messages that he was sure would be waiting for his response. The receptionist advised him that there wasn't one message for him, which was mildly deflating as we had been gone for five days. Thus began our consulting business!

Another incident, which turned into a fantastic opportunity for Sellinger Associates, occurred in November, 2014, when a call came in for Mike, from a gentleman with a distinctly southern lilt to his voice. Not recognizing this man's name or his firm, Mike had the call put through to his voice mail. A day passed before listening to his messages and this one definitely stood out. A Mr. Mike Rogers, from Nashville, was wondering if we would be interested in working with his firm on "an exciting project in our neck of the woods"... as the message continued, the "exciting project" he was describing was the Detroit Events Center, better known as the Red Wings Arena! After listening to the message a second time, and not believing what he heard, Mike returned the call to Nashville, which led to an interview and eventually to our involvement in the project of a lifetime.

The Detroit Event Center will not only be the Red Wings home arena, it will be a venue for major concerts and events throughout the year. This "campus" will be a huge part of the continuing renaissance of Detroit and we are thrilled to be involved in such a profound way.

Sellinger Associates Inc. is at 19821 Farmington Road, Livonia. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, call 248-482-0045 or visit www.sellingerinc.com.

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