



Rochelle Stoddard
Owner & President
Berman Brothers & Rubin Iron Works

By Lorrie DeFrank

When Rochelle Stoddard's dad asked her to join the family business, she wondered what she would do at a scrapyards. Twenty-one years later she owns the place and, as president, has overseen significant progress.

In recognition of her success, she was named Small Business Leader of the Year for JAX Chamber's Entrepreneurial Growth Division for 2020-2021.

Stoddard, a nature lover and environmentalist, had been taking care of cougars, wolves, tigers and other

wild animals at White Oak Conservation Center. Foreseeing changes there in the late 1990s she was pursuing other possibilities when her father, Charles Berman, persuaded her to become the third generation at Berman Brothers' scrap metal service and recycling business despite her misgivings.

"I never dreamed I would be where I am now," said Stoddard, who joins her family in observing 75 years of business this year. "I had to learn about everything from regulatory policies to client safety to accounting to human resources. I wanted to do the best I could to take care of our people."

When Berman Brothers acquired Rubin Iron Works, a former blacksmith shop, in 2005, the company became a one-stop shop for custom metal fabrication. Stoddard's promotion to president in 2017 earned it the distinction of being a Woman-Owned Small Business. Her husband, David, is vice president and runs Rubin Iron Works.

Stoddard credits accountants and other longtime employees with showing her the ropes of the company her grandfather co-founded after World War II to find revenue in military surplus steel. "We transitioned into scrap metal recycling in the 1980s and expanded into selling finished new steel products," she said. "We scrap, sell and fabricate metal."

In addition to her valuable on-the-job training, Stoddard welcomed opportunities to expand her business knowledge that JAX Chamber offered. She started with JAX Bridges (Cohort 8), an entrepreneurial growth education program that her husband (Cohort 9) also had taken. The couple took advantage of customer development workshops offered by Jacksonville Women's Business Center and she participated in its Marketing Matters program. She recently graduated from JWBC's ATHENA**Powerlink** professional mentoring program.

"I was trying to find help with connecting the dots and met people who befriended me and really wanted to see me be successful," she said. "While our business had a longstanding relationship with the Chamber, it is different today. It's inclusive, positive and productive, very much because of the Entrepreneurial Growth Division and JWBC."

By the time Stoddard was accepted into ATHENA**Powerlink** in the last quarter of 2019 she was well aware of the enormous responsibility she had of keeping a complicated, multi-faceted business going. She

had not anticipated being challenged with a global pandemic. The timing of acquiring the guidance of expert mentors selected specifically for her was perfect.

“I hadn’t had a lot of people to bounce ideas off of or to validate my positions, and that’s the biggest thing I’ve gotten out of ATHENA,” she said. “We are doing all kinds of continuous improvements, constantly working on making our business as profitable as possible.”

When Covid-19 impacted the country in early 2020 Stoddard agonized that she might have to lay off some of their nearly 70 employees, something they never had to do. But with bankers, attorneys and other professional mentors drilling down into her business practices and providing encouragement she not only retained all the workers but improved cost control, inventory, purchasing and other processes to keep up the revenue.

She credits mentor Lamar Kaleel—who she referred to as a bright person from an entirely different field who really cared about her company—with giving her invaluable reassurance just by saying, “You are doing all the right things.”

“I believe Rochelle has been successful because of her visionary approach to her business and the industry in which it operates. Rochelle knows where she wants to take the business, and has made significant progress in the past year,” said Kaleel, credit risk advisor, NorthStar Banking Advisors. “She initially articulated her objectives and challenges to the ATHENA panel, has been willing to listen to advice and ideas, and is passionate about finding success.”

Being a small business owner is tough, said Stoddard, calling the folks at JAX Chamber their cheerleaders. “I am grateful for the sincere people who take the time to do this and I look forward to a long relationship and paying it forward.”

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