

Life After Loss

Advanced Communication Cabling rebuilds, redefines itself after tragedy

By Marta K. Dodd

As Kevin Fritz's employment at a Jackson telephone technology cabling company became uncertain, in 1991 he and his wife, Ruth, started a similar company, Advanced Communication Cabling, Inc. (ACCI), with Ruth as owner.

"Someone suggested that it might be best if our company was woman-owned," she said. Kevin later left the other employer and became ACCI vice president; Ruth remained the owner. They developed local and regional commercial technology cabling accounts, including installing a phone system in all the Michigan Rite Aid stores, installing cabling for Albion College and for Michigan Center and Northwest schools in Jackson County, and Roscommon Public Schools.

Tragedy struck in November 2007. Kevin did not return home when expected from deer hunting on their property. Guided by their son, Tom, on the telephone, Ruth eventually found Kevin as darkness fell. He was on the ground, unconscious; he had not worn his safety

harness that day and fell from his tree stand. He passed away the following day.

Almost immediately, many customers defected. "Even one we had worked with for the entire 16 years would not hire us," Ruth said. "It was that story, over and over and over. Kev and I had been married for more than 27 years and worked together, but when he died they assumed I didn't know anything." ACCI's orders for materials and supplies the following year were down more than 80 percent. They reduced employees to a skeleton crew.

"It was some rough times," she said, quietly. "It was hard. Emotionally, I had lost my best friend but needed to keep work going so everyone could take care of their families and pay their mortgages."

Today, ACCI employs up to 15 people, depending on workload, doing "anything revolving around low voltage or information technology, from internet to security." They travel to serve customers across the United States.



Photo by Audrey Spring / Jackson Magazine

ACCI owner Ruth Fritz and son Bryan Fritz, who is the company project manager and estimator; while the company previously focused on running cabling for commercial customers, government contracts now comprise 95 percent of the business.

They routinely handle projects involving millions of dollars in materials and labor. Their 2017 work was double their work in 2016, and last January’s projections for 2018 topped 2017. Getting from ACCI’s “then” to their “now ” required heeding some advice, changing their customer base, and substantial determination.

A key suggestion

“ACCI’s honesty and straightforward approach are hard to find. They respond quickly, treat their employees and customers like family, and do excellent work,” said Jim Berger, general manager at WESCO

Distribution in Sterling Heights, an ACCI supplier for data communications and security projects for 20-plus years. He made a critical suggestion about ACCI’s future.

“Late in 2008, Jim asked me how things were going,” Ruth Fritz recalled. “I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t getting much work.” Berger suggested looking into the federal Small Business Administration’s 8(a) Program, which helps small businesses get “set-asides” and access to work for the federal government. By law, government agencies must “set aside” a certain portion of their contracts for women- and minority-owned businesses.

A year and a half and 500-plus double-sided pages later, Ruth submitted ACCI’s 8(a) application in February 2010. It was denied, so she resubmitted it in November 2010. ACCI was accepted into the program in January 2012; the company won its first government contract that autumn and has won many since then. They usually cannot discuss details about their government projects.

“The 8(a) and working with the government saved us,” she said. “Some people say that working with the government is a nightmare, but we haven’t seen that. Now, people call me about work, because of our



Photo Courtesy of ACCI

Shown here are custom build data cabinets with custom made cables; these are design builds that ACCI works on with the customer to get exactly what they want.

FAST FACTS

-  **Company**
Advanced Communication Cabling, Inc.
-  **Location**
P.O. Box 308
Spring Arbor, 49283
-  **President/Owner**
Ruth Fritz
-  **Project Manager/ Estimator**
Bryan Fritz
-  **Mission**
Produce an enduring legacy of success and prosperity for our company and our customers, built on excellence, dependability, and loyalty.
-  **Phone**
517-524-2224
-  **Email**
ruth@advancedcomcabling.com
-  **Website**
advancedcomcabling.com

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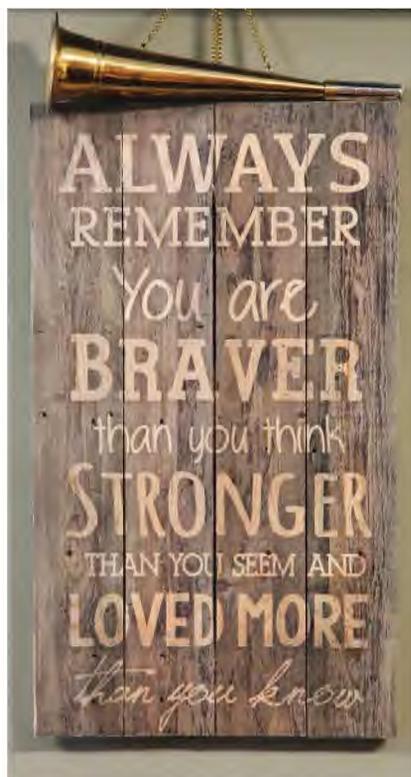








Photos by Audrey Spring / Jackson Magazine



The framed poster on the left is one Kevin Fritz found in the woods; its presence on the office wall serves as a daily reminder of him. On the right is a sign that Ruth hung in her office on a day she needed words of encouragement; they continue to motivate and uplift her daily.

reputation.” Recent projects included developing and installing a 911-dispatch emergency communication system on a 250,000-person military base, and at another base, developing and installing a “video wall” of six 65-inch television monitors for worldwide videoconferencing.

Ruth and Kevin’s son, Bryan Fritz, is the ACCI project manager and estimator. He said their company previously focused on running cabling for commercial customers, but, now, government contracts are 95 percent of their business. “More and more, we’re getting into end solutions for our customers,” he said. “They come to us and say they want ‘this’ to happen. We bring in the right people to get it done.”

Pennie Southwell assisted ACCI with government contracting as the director of the Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) in Jackson. She said, “During my 22 years at PTAC, without a doubt Ruth was the hardest working client I had.” Southwell now works part-time doing marketing and research for ACCI.

John Waldron, senior vice president at County National Bank (CNB) in Jackson, shared similar comments. “ACCI and the Fritz family were one of my first clients when I started with CNB in Jackson in 2002. The loss of Kevin and the economic recession would have shut down many companies, but it was evident that Ruth would continue. The CNB Board helped by approving payment concessions and additional funding. I am so impressed by what they have accomplished.”

Loyalty, service valued

Ruth Fritz said ACCI is loyal to those who were loyal to them during their difficult times, including Berger, Southwell and Waldron.

“If it hadn’t been for working with County National Bank, it would have been even worse,” she said. “John was amazing, standing beside me all the way. He listened when things were bad.” She prefers to order materials through Michigan companies that stuck with them and continues to work with sub-contractors and firms such as

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their insurance companies, that stayed loyal to ACCI. That consistency also helps ACCI support their military customers.

“There is something about working on the bases,” she said. “We see these young people serving and sacrificing for us to have freedom. We don’t leave until our project is done right.” ACCI supports “Wreaths Across America,” which places wreaths on veterans’ graves, and in 2017 “adopted” and helped a veteran’s family at Christmastime.

“I never would have thought we would be doing the size projects we are doing,” Ruth said. “The only way we made it was with the support of family, friends and loyal employees, and our determination to make it. We just did not give up. There were many closed doors, but we worked as a team and didn’t give in. We were trying to get over our loss and just had to keep going.”

Added Bryan, “I like to think something good comes out of everything bad. Also, my dad never held a grudge. He just loved life. I try to live that way as we go along.”



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