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**HOW PAM BOYER Poured  
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THE FIRE PREVENTION BIZ**

**BY JAN TEGLER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYAN BURRIS**

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Every day when Pamela Boyer walks into her office at the Anne Arundel County headquarters of the company she guides, she takes a seat in the same chair her husband once occupied.

James “Jim” Boyer founded Baltimore Fire Protection & Equipment Company, Inc., in 1970. Over the next 24 years, Jim and Pamela built one of the leading fire protection companies in the region – together – until 1994 when Jim succumbed to cancer at age 48.

The passing of the firm’s dynamic founder was devastating to all who knew him. It might also have been devastating to the company he started – by then known as BFPE International – if not for the determination and character of the one person who best understood his devotion for the firm best.

In a business dedicated to putting out fires, Pamela Boyer kept one fire alive – her passion for BFPE International and the people who make it run. Much more than a simple enterprise, for Boyer, BFPE is a way of life, a 500-plus-employee extended family dedicated to the life safety business. Since his passing, she has taken the firm to new heights, helping to set trends in an industry that accepts change slowly and displaying vision that would make its founder proud.

BFPE has experienced growth and success that Pamela Boyer’s competitors never imagined. In fact, they predicted failure. Female leaders are exceedingly rare in the fire protection industry, and Boyer’s male counterparts, both locally and regionally, initially expected that the company would be sold after Jim Boyer’s death. Upon hearing that Mrs. Boyer would take the reins, they discounted any chance of success for the firm, Pamela Boyer remembers. More than a decade later, she has proven them wrong. BFPE has surpassed all of its competitors to become the number one fire protection company in the region and one of the top companies in the country, and today, BFPE is on of the largest woman-owned company in the Greater Washington region. Over the 14 years of her tenure as company president, Boyer’s firm has grown exponentially, increasing revenue from \$9 million in 1994 to more than \$60 million in 2007. In 2008, BFPE International expects to surpass \$70 million.

All of the success has come under the guidance of a woman who, prior to her abrupt ascendancy, was known chiefly as “Jim Boyer’s wife.” Make no mistake, however – Pamela Boyer is a gifted leader whose personal touch and genuine warmth are rarely found in the corporate world. While some might characterize her leadership style as “female,” Boyer has never made a point of her gender in terms of business. She has just gotten on with a job she loves.

Ask Pamela Boyer how she’s been able to achieve success and she answers that she is simply carrying on what her husband began. But there’s something more, the fire that matters most.



## IN THE BASEMENT

BFPE began in the basement – Jim Boyer’s grandmother’s basement in Pimlico.

“He’d call me from his grandmother’s basement and I’d hear the furnace go on in the wintertime,” Pamela Boyer remembers.

In 1970, the company’s creator was a history teacher in Baltimore. But Jim Boyer had an entrepreneurial streak and an itch to see what the business world had to offer. He had a number of ideas but took a cue from his brother-in-law who then worked for a small fire protection company. Made aware that municipal regulations regarding fire prevention were tightening, particularly in restaurants with commercial cooking equipment, Jim Boyer saw an opportunity.

With \$1,000 borrowed from the same generous woman who allowed him the use of her cellar and with the purchase of a used milk truck, Boyer went into the fire protection business himself.

“He actually started out doing restaurant systems, selling extinguishing systems to places like Hardees and Burger King,” Pam Boyer says. “He would go out selling during the day, and at night, he and his brother, who still works for us, installed them.”



“When [Jim] first asked me to take over the service department, we had three trucks and three-by-five cards with our accounts.”

Pam met Jim the same year and almost immediately was enlisted to aid the business. At the time, she worked for the regional manager of U.S. Steel Corporation.

“I still worked for U.S. Steel for two years after I met him. My paychecks paid the payroll, which at that time included his brother and his cousin. Then we married and I quit U.S. Steel and started working with him doing the billing, which at the time consisted of maybe three invoices a week.”

Slowly, BFPE began to acquire clients, and by 1971 the business moved to a location in Cockeysville. Progress continued through the early summer of 1972, when Hurricane Agnes came calling.

“I can remember going to the office in a little canoe,” Boyer says. “Everything was floating and we lost the two trucks we had by then. My husband said to me, ‘We can’t do this. We don’t have any money. I don’t know what we’re going to do.’”

A \$10,000 Small Business Administration loan allowed the business to get back on its feet, and soon BFPE was under a new roof in Timonium. By this time, many of the systems the company had installed were in need of maintenance. Jim Boyer recognized that servicing the equipment his firm had already put in place was a logical and potentially profitable next step. And though the Boyers had recently welcomed a daughter, Jim turned to his wife to create and oversee a service department.

“When he first asked me to take over the service department, we had three trucks and three-by-five cards with our accounts,” Pamela Boyer says. “Prior to that, I had been working part time because we’d just had a baby. One day, I walked in and Jim said, ‘I want you to take over the service department.’ His brother said, ‘How can she do that? She doesn’t know a system from a fire extinguisher.’”

That was all Pam needed to hear. The next day she went along with one of the company’s service technicians with the goal of learning as much as she could about servicing the systems BFPE installed.

“Here I was, out in greasy restaurants, changing fuseable links, tripping the systems and more,” she says. “I said to them, ‘If I’m going to get respect from the fellas, I’m going to have to know all of this.’”

Thus begun a practice that would be repeated throughout Pam Boyer’s career. When presented with a new business challenge, she learned it from the ground up. She also took to heart her husband’s down-to-earth philosophy, “Take care of the customer and the rest will take care of itself.”

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It's a credo BFPE's leader follows to this day and a behavior she encourages throughout the organization. Boyer's efforts paid off through the 1970s and 1980s as she grew the service department, balancing the responsibilities of raising the couple's daughter with providing price quotes, hiring and training service personnel, and coordinating the schedule. So successful was Pam Boyer that the service department quickly grew to be the most profitable part of the business.

Meanwhile, Jim Boyer, whom his wife calls a "visionary," was looking after the financial end of the company and bringing in business through a series of acquisitions. Pam Boyer was with him, working quietly, absorbing whatever she could, taking good care of the company's customers all the while. In 1983, BFPE acquired Columbia Fire & Safety. The following year the company purchased Kidde Sales & Service, and in 1985, it obtained Safety First. The same year, BFPE International moved to Hanover in Anne Arundel County where the Boyers constructed a 10,000-square-foot facility. The location remains the company's headquarters, although the need for expansion has forced BFPE to lease an additional 65,000 square feet adjacent to their original structure.

"[Jim] would make the deal and he'd say, 'Now you make money with it,'" Pamela Boyer says. And make money with it she did. By the late 1980s, BFPE had bolstered its core business, supplying and servicing portable fire extinguishers, with a new department dedicated to specialty gases. Specialty gases are common to fire suppression systems that extinguish fire chemically without the need for liquids.

As the 1990s dawned, BFPE's position in the Washington, Northern Virginia and Baltimore markets was solid. Growth was part of a larger plan for the firm, although the company was not actively looking for further acquisitions.

"We were known as the company that did the small systems," Pamela Boyer says. "There were a couple other companies in the region that had gone into business 30 years before us. They were the companies that got the large system business. We looked up to these companies."

## MR. BOYER'S WIFE



In 1994, Jim Boyer succumbed to cancer after a four-year battle that he had faced together with the woman who had been at his side for 34 years. Pamela Boyer fought just as hard as Jim, aiding him in any way she could, acting as his advocate in business and in the hospital. Mr. Boyer was not expected to live long after his initial diagnosis, but with Mrs. Boyer's support and her relentless pursuit of alternative treatments, he enjoyed the last four years of his life.

His death was a major blow not only to the Boyer family but to BFPE International. Always a charismatic figure, Jim Boyer was widely known and respected in his industry. The firm's faithful employees surely wondered what was next. What would happen to BFPE? Would it be sold? And if not, who would lead the company?

Many families might have opted to sell their business in such circumstances, but that was never an option for Pam Boyer. BFPE was her life, and its employees were like family.

"I'll never forget. We had had a managers meeting planned for two weeks after Jim passed," Pam remembers. "My accountant, Larry Epstein, who happens to be a very good friend of mine, said, 'Pam, you have to go to that meeting. You need to



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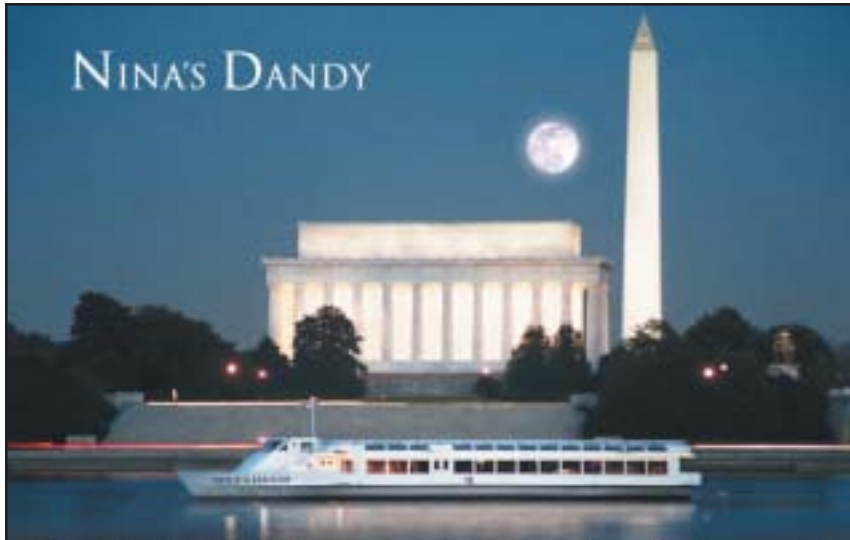
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stand up and tell everyone that you're going to continue this business.”

Though she had never thought of herself as leader, she acted when the time came, and looking back on it, the transition was less awkward than she anticipated.

“I was more prepared than I thought I was,” she says. “I truly believe the love I had for my husband and the involvement I had had in the business allowed this to come naturally to me. We have such professional people who know every aspect of the technical side of the business. People rallied around me even though I was a female in a male business.”

Having a knowledgeable and devoted staff in place was key to making a quick transition for Pam Boyer. She might not have known everything, but like any good leader, she knew how to marshal the resources at her disposal, and just as importantly, she once again showed a willingness to learn whatever she could about every aspect of her business.

“When I took over, I didn't know the sales end of the business,” she says. “I hadn't had too much opportunity to interact with the sales people, but I wanted to know them and understand what they meant to the company. So I looked at job after job and learned. Things just came to me. I guess I had been around it so long.”

Pam Boyer had been intimately involved with BFPE for its entire existence but was chiefly known outside the firm simply as Jim Boyer's wife. That perception was difficult to overcome in the predominantly male-led industry.

Soon after Mrs. Boyer took over BFPE, the company sought to obtain WBE (Woman Business Enterprise) certification. Qualifying as a WBE allows businesses to participate in private and public programs that require utilization and tracking of woman-owned companies. Getting approval proved more of a challenge than expected.

“I went to a meeting for state and federal approval with my accountant,” Boyer says, “and I had a man stand up in front of 15 people and look at my accountant and say, ‘Mr. Epstein, what does Mrs. Boyer pay you to run her business?’ I said, ‘I'll answer that. Come over to our facility, gentlemen. Let me show you what we do.’ We got approved, but they couldn't believe a woman could run a fire protection company.”



“I truly believe the love I had for my husband and the involvement I had had in the business allowed this to come naturally to me.”

It wasn't the only instance in which Pam Boyer faced cynicism. Honored by Kidde Fire systems for being its national sales leader several years ago, Boyer happily accepted the distributor of the year award from the company's president. Just before the ceremony, a man from another fire protection company approached Boyer and condescendingly asked if she was going to the podium to accept the award for her husband.

But soon after Mr. Boyer's wife assumed the mantle at BFPE, it became clear that she had every bit as much vision as her husband and even more ambition.

## TAKING CHARGE

The speed with which Pam Boyer successfully made the transition from top lieutenant to top dog at BFPE resulted from a number of factors, including a clearly articulated vision.

“I decided that we were not going to be the company that does the little systems anymore,” she says. “We're going to compete on a wider basis and we're going to do the larger systems.”

With that in mind, Boyer began the process of taking BFPE International from a company that specialized in specialty gases and portable fire extinguisher and restaurant systems to a company that could offer more – a one stop shop for commercial fire protection. Even today, most fire suppression businesses offer limited services to



# Fire up the team

**M**ore than 500 people now work for BFPE in seven offices, extending from Lancaster, PA, down to Wilmington, NC, with skill sets that address every aspect of fire protection. Hiring good people (BFPE's president Pamela Boyer still personally hires all employees) and treating them well is just as much a guiding principle for the company's president as taking care of its customers. Pam Boyer has a knack for people and a well-developed set of skills often overlooked by CEOs – emotional skills.

"My philosophy is that we also take care of each other inside the company," Boyer notes. "I want kindness. The team we have come to us strictly by word of mouth. They're cousins, uncles, brothers and friends. They work hard together, they play hard together and they take care of each other."

Rick Scott, BFPE's vice president of business develop-

ment, confirms Boyer's instinct for people. "What makes her so successful is her personal touch," he says. "It's the little things she does as much as the larger things. Currently, we're trying to secure a line of fire protection equipment. The president of the manufacturer came to see us and couldn't believe that Pam knew everybody's name as she showed him around. She was asking what everyone's kids were doing. Even with over 500 people in the company, she still keeps in close contact with everybody and knows their stories. That's a testament to who she is."

"In a lot of corporate environments, and I came from one, it's all about numbers, but it's not like that at BFPE," Scott contends. "There's an excitement to our offices that I can't explain."

Boyer says that her managers are not just managers –

they're her friends. "Almost every one of them started out in the field, and I promoted them to management," she says. "They have the respect of the technicians working for them because they realize that the managers once did exactly what they are now doing."

According to Scott, every one of the company's departments has employees who have as many as 30 years' tenure, and there are perhaps 100 workers who've been with the firm for 20 years. New employees are encouraged to explore the different aspects of BFPE until they find the specialty or department that suits them best.

In return, Pam Boyer demands that her employees have the highest integrity and work hard to do every job right, fix any problems that arise and maintain a standard of honesty worthy of a company in the life-safety business.

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BFPE's employees rededicated a garden in memory of Pam Boyer's husband and company founder Jim Boyer on the 12th anniversary of his death.

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building contractors. Increasingly, however, clients want to deal with a single entity for fire protection, Boyer explains.

"They want to make one phone call to someone who can come in and provide and maintain their portable extinguishers, their fire alarms and sprinklers, and provide security as well," she says. "We're probably one of maybe 15 throughout the country that do total fire protection."

Rick Scott, who works as BFPE's vice president of business development from its Chesapeake, VA, office, points out that Boyer has not only become the leader of one of the largest, most capable fire protection firms in the country, she was one of the pioneers of total fire protection.

"She built the company to be a total fire organization," he says. "Total fire protection capability is becoming more common because of what Pam has done. She was one of the first to embrace that concept. From a managerial standpoint, it's difficult sometimes to bring these different kinds of people from different business units together, but now they're integrated under one umbrella and they find they have a lot in common."

Boyer did it by not only having a plan for her business but by acting when opportunity came along. One such opportunity presented itself on April Fools Day



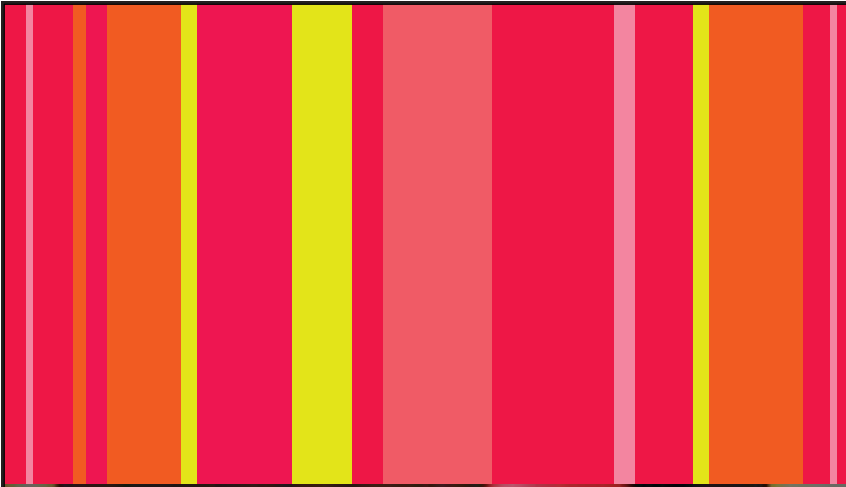


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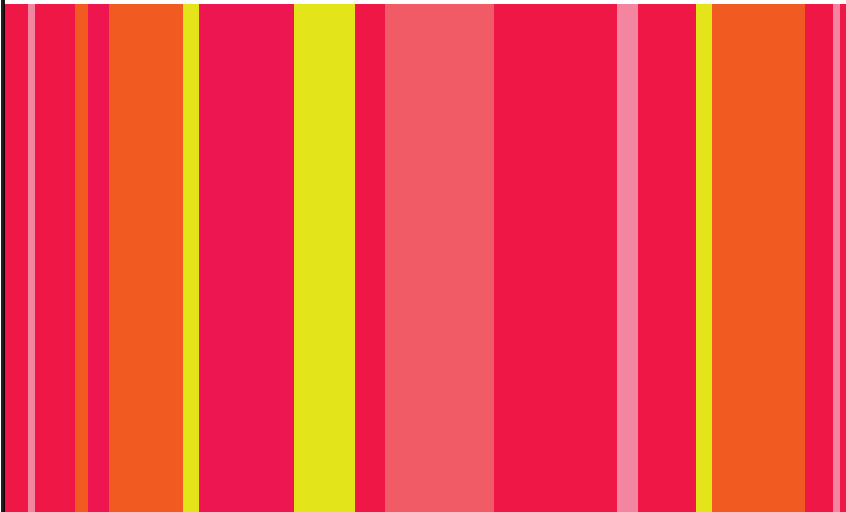


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weekend in 1996 when BFPE's president was approached by the service manager of a sizeable Baltimore area fire protection company that specialized in fire alarm systems. It was a business Boyer had been keen to bring to BFPE.

"A service manager from Thorn Automated Systems walked into my office that weekend," Boyer remembers. "He said, 'Pam, we are being sold to another company and many of our people do not want to go. Do you need any fire alarm technicians?'"

The next day, BFPE hired seven of the 11 Thorn employees she interviewed. "I was not looking to buy a business at the time; I was just looking to pick up some good technicians," Boyer says. "All of a sudden, I got a call from the gentleman who was working on the deal with the company that wanted to buy Thorn. He told me that the buyer was backing out of the deal because they didn't want to purchase the company if they weren't going to get the technicians. A day later, he called me back and asked, 'Do you have any interest in buying us?'"

Boyer says that even though the company had offered each technician \$2,500 to stay, they all had refused the offer and were opting to join BFPE instead. Boyer's next move was to call her accountant and her lawyer.

"This was my first acquisition," she says, "and I said, 'We're going to do this deal this weekend.' I knew that if the news hit the streets, I wouldn't have a chance."

After reviewing Thorn's accounts and negotiating late into the night that Friday, Boyer wrote a check. The following Monday, she owned Thorn Automated, complete with all of its technicians and accounts.

"I shook my head and asked myself, 'Did I just do this?' But it was the best acquisition I ever made because it threw us into the fire alarm building business," she says. "To this day, everybody who came with the company is still here."



Federal business has picked up with BFPE providing fire protection systems for the National Naval Medical Center, Walter Reed and the National Institutes of Health.

BFPE's acquisition of Thorn Automated was the first of two crucial purchases that added to the firm's total fire protection arsenal. The second came just a year later when Boyer moved to acquire North Carolina-based Atlantic Fire Systems. By this time, BFPE already had a small office of its own in Rocky Mount, NC. But Boyer wanted to expand her company's presence in markets south of the Northern Virginia area and align BFPE with one of the most important fire protection equipment manufacturers, a brand known as "Ansul." Owned by Tyco Fire Suppression and Building Products, the Ansul line of special hazard fire protection products is well regarded. BFPE was already authorized to install systems from many other leading equipment manufacturers in the fire protection industry but had not been able to gain a foothold with Ansul.

"I wanted that line and couldn't get it in the area because the competition had it sewn up," she says. "If you're not authorized with a certain product, you can't sell and install it, and that makes it difficult to offer total fire protection in every case."

Atlantic Fire Systems was ripe for takeover and its owner had been a friend of Jim Boyer's.

"He called me and said, 'We don't want anyone running our business but you guys,'" Boyer says. BFPE seized the opportunity and succeed in adding the Ansul line to their northern markets. "Now we have every product line out there," Boyer says.

The company's capabilities allowed it to expand greatly during the late 1990s as it took on work with a large of number of the data centers that blossomed at the time. BFPE even snagged contracts with America Online, and because of the quality of their work, gained more business with AOL. Federal business also picked up with BFPE providing fire protection systems for government entities such as the National Naval Medical Center, Walter Reed Army Hospital and the National Institutes of Health. Company employees, including Boyer, earned top-secret clearances, allowing them to do work for many other federal institutions, some of which is classified.



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International business also has grown to include work in far flung areas including Bermuda, Germany, Egypt, Italy and Saudi Arabia. Locally, BFPE has been a part of fire protection efforts for high-profile projects, such as the conservation and preservation of the Star Spangled Banner at the Smithsonian Museum of American History; integrated fire alarm, sprinkler and detection and control systems for the Maryland State House; fire safety and security systems for Amtrak; and extinguishing and commercial hood systems for Ravens Stadium.

## CONTINUED GROWTH

Managed growth is the future for BFPE International, says Boyer. She plans to bolster the company's service department because of its high profitability and maintain the stability her people have come to expect.

"We're in the process of opening another office in Dover, DE," she says. "Once that's open, that will probably be it for expansion for now because we'll have offices all the way from Dover down to South Carolina. We're strategically positioned in a very good area. I'm focusing on making every office we have as strong as possible, financially and personnel-wise."

Boyer's daughter and nephews work for the company, as well, so it's possible that the Boyer stamp on BFPE will remain indelible for some time. For now, Pam Boyer remains the company's guiding force and with characteristic grace, believes that anyone can succeed with determination.

"I believe anybody can be capable if they work hard and put their heart in it," she says. "I'm so proud of where we've come to. We started in a basement in a house with a thousand dollars and an old milk truck. Jim had such a passion for what he did, and I had such a love for him that it carried through, and I'm so proud."

CEO



Pam Boyer built BFPE into one of the nation's first total fire protection companies, netting high-profile international and government contracts.

# Tech Celebration

## A N N U A L B A N Q U E T



Keynote Speaker:

**Meg Whitman**

former CEO and President, eBay

Special Honoree:

**Congressman Tom Davis**

Meg Whitman, who helped build eBay into the world's premiere online auction site, will impart some of her priceless knowledge and insight to NVTC members and guests.

NVTC also will honor Congressman Tom Davis of Virginia's 11th District on this special evening. Representative Davis is retiring at the end of this session of Congress.



**The Ritz-Carlton**  
1700 Tysons Boulevard,  
McLean, VA  
For more information,  
please visit  
[www.nvtc.org/events](http://www.nvtc.org/events)

**Monday October 27, 2008**

5:30 – 6:30 p.m. Registration & Networking  
6:30 – 9:15 p.m. Dinner & Program

**nvtc**  
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