

AWARD WINNERS

Woman of the Year:

Breaking Barriers In A Male-Dominated Business

by Rodd Monts

Relaxing in her cozy office, Pamela Rodgers reflects on her career as an auto dealer, which is inspiring considering the thorny path that led to her decision three years ago to open Rodgers Chevrolet, her GM dealership in Woodhaven, Mich.

Rodgers is the first recipient of African Americans On Wheels' Urban Wheel Award for Woman of the Year. The prestigious award recognizes her efforts to build a successful dealership that sells some 150 new vehicles per month and boasts annual sales of \$46 million. Rodgers ranked 54th in 1998 on *Black Enterprise's* Auto Dealer 100 list. Moreover, she is one

of only a dozen or so African-American women who control a major new vehicle franchise out of more than 900 minority-owned dealerships throughout the country.

"The greatest recognition you can have is to be recognized by your peers," said Rodgers. "When I first started they thought this business was too tough for a woman, and there were stereotypes. But as things evolved and women became a dominant force in the consumer market it became apparent that women are needed in this business."

Interestingly, Rodgers never set out to sell Chevys, much less own a dealership with her name on the marquee. Fresh out of college, with an undergraduate degree in Economics and a MBA in Financing, the native Detroit native had her sights set on a promising career as a financial analyst. Yet, even though she was a fast-track professional, Rodgers was uncertain about what she really wanted to do with her life. Her transition into auto retailing was an adventurous ride. After leaving college, Rodgers accepted a job with Ford as a financial analyst. Two years later, she developed an interest in Ford's Minority Dealer Program. Rodgers felt she had the corporate



knowledge, finance background and keen awareness needed to be successful in the program, but lacked the retail experience. That was not a deterrent.

"I quit my job and started selling cars. A few people thought it was a bit cavalier," said Rodgers, fondly recalling the early days.

She sold Buicks at a Flint, Mich., dealership, formerly owned by Chuck Harrell. It wasn't easy and, after six months, Rodgers was doing some serious soul-searching. She decided to stick it out and accepted another sales position in Flat Rock, Mich.

"I have had a number of mentors along the way and I don't think it would have been possible to make it without their help," she said.

Two years later, Rodgers was accepted into Ford's minority dealer program and began two years of intensive training at Jack Demmer Ford in Wayne, Mich. She learned all the aspects of the business from parts and service to the administrative details of running a dealership, from both a new and used car sales perspective.

Ford program managers paired Rodgers with the general manager from Demmer, and the duo opened a Ford dealership in Flint in 1990. Unfortunately, the dealership fell victim to bad timing, as a result of the Persian Gulf War, and a weak market, in a town dominated by GM employees. The combination spelled disaster for the fledgling franchise, which was liquidated less than two years later.

Rodgers rebounded in 1993, when she became a Chevy dealer. Rodgers has steadily increased the dealership's sales since then, more than doubling revenue from about \$20 million in 1997 to more than \$40 million last year.

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"Every dealer that was successful before me paved the way," Rodgers said. "You have to give credit to the pioneers such as Ed Davis (the first African American new car dealer) who really broke new ground and made it possible for us to be successful," Rodgers added. Her next goal is to open a second franchise, although no date has been set. One thing Rodgers is certain of is that she is a car dealer for life. Once you get into the business, she contends, you never want to do anything else. ■

