

# Signs for the Times BY DREW RUBLE

## Selective Structures rises up from its predecessor's ashes to become a top industry player

**It's ironic that Athens entrepreneur Marsha Cole's first company was named Phoenix Structures. In truth, that name would better fit Cole's second foray into the outdoor sign and billboard manufacturing business, Selective Structures, which rose from its predecessor's ashes to become the largest custom sign fabrication outfit in the nation, and one of McMinn County's best-kept business secrets.**

Michigan transplant Cole (and partners) launched Phoenix in the 1990s, quickly growing the business into a premier player. But Cole paid a steep price for her success. "In one instance, my then-husband and I were at work on Christmas Eve loading pipe on a truck because the client had to have it in the ground the next day," she says. "We didn't have a life."

Cole eventually sold that business to Boca Raton, Fla.-based venture capital group Sun Capital. But the business unraveled under Sun's guidance, eventually ceasing operations. One of Cole's former partners, Bill Kuhn, began prodding Cole to re-enter the space, saying past customers were calling and wanting signs. By then a discontented retiree, Cole (and partners) forged Selective Structures. Plans were to build the business slowly, but on the strength of Cole's stellar reputation in the industry, the new company outgrew its first Athens location before ever really moving into it.

"When we set up four-and-a-half years ago, we set it up where we knew we could make a living, put people back to

work and make about \$6 million or \$7 million in revenue per year," Cole says. "That's all we really wanted to do. But in our first year back, we did \$10 million in revenue."

"Now, I just closed out March 2007," Cole adds, "and we did \$2 million in that month alone. So we're on track to do somewhere between \$22 million and \$24 million in revenue this year. We've successfully doubled the business."

Such numbers make Selective the largest among about a dozen major manufacturers of outdoors signs, billboards and support steel structures nationwide. They comprise a close-knit group feeding a healthy industry. The Outdoor Advertising Association of America reported in March 2007 that billboard advertising revenue grew 8% in 2006, a higher growth rate than most traditional advertising venues (such as print) and second only to the Internet.

Driving growth is the industry's aggressive retrofitting of existing signs to accommodate LED electronic screens, lighted message boards and "flip turn" models, which enable multiple "faces" on a single billboard. Government investment in LED for traffic alerts and public service messages has also aided industry growth, as has an uptick in traffic congestion on America's highways and byways. According to the Transportation Research Board in Washington, D.C., the average national commuter travel time averaged 24.5 minutes in 2000, up from 22.4 minutes a decade earlier. "Bad news for the average worker," wrote Alabama-based *Outdoor Advertising* magazine editor Ellery Berryhill in a recent article, but "helpful sup-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SELECTIVE STRUCTURES

port for [the outdoor advertising industry].”

Threats to continued growth, however, are abundant. Public outcry over the aesthetics of billboards and escalating government regulation of the industry are ever-present concerns for companies like Selective. For instance, Cole’s home state of Michigan recently banned LEDs along certain thoroughfares due to concerns that they are too attention-grabbing for motorists. Here in Tennessee, electronic billboards (with few exceptions) are not allowed on interstates and state routes. Video and electronic signs have also been outlawed or heavily restricted in many cities and towns across the state.

As such, Cole’s savvy diversification of Selective’s product line into the world of competitive sports helps alleviate some of the pressure on traditional sign-building operations. Working with publicly traded, South Dakota-based electronic sign pioneers Daktronics, Selective is increasingly building scoreboards at high school and college athletic stadiums, and at press time was pursuing work on the Dallas Cowboys’ new football stadium. Selective already builds NASCAR sponsor boards—the 20-foot-high by 60-foot-wide signs encircling many top racetracks. Selective’s crowning achievement in the sports world, though, is its work building all the TV towers and leaderboards for the Augusta National Golf Course, home of the Masters professional golf tournament, which is slowly phasing out its old wooden signs.

Given all her success with Selective, how does Cole propose to avoid the all-consuming trap that ensnared her with Phoenix?

“We’ve added people,” Cole explains. “We ran Phoenix like a family. We’re running Selective like a business.”

A business that is increasingly on the radar as one of the fastest growing ventures in Tennessee. **tn**

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# At the Center of it All

BY DREW RUBLE

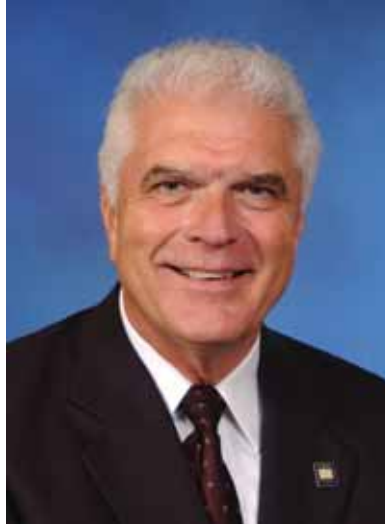
**R**enowned Tennessee lawman Larry Wallace is an equally renowned workaholic. Throughout his 40-year career in law enforcement, 60- and 70-hour workweeks were the norm for the former Athens police officer, twice-elected McMinn County sheriff and 11-year director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, a role he served in under three governors. Hobbies? He's had none. Said another way, Wallace's poor golf game is a testament to his work ethic across the decades.

Retired from law enforcement and at age 63, Wallace still hasn't slowed down much. Now vice president of external affairs at Tennessee Wesleyan College, the soon-to-be 150-year-old Methodist institution located in Athens, Wallace is also the adjunct professor behind the creation of a criminal justice curricu-

lum at TWC that has recently grown beyond his own qualifications to adjudicate it.

What began as a night class offering quickly evolved into a popular "emphasis" in the behavioral sciences department. Wallace's depth of perspective teamed with his difficult-to-duplicate access to people and places across the criminal justice sphere—police, prosecutorial, defense, judicial, prison, probation and parole—adds practical appeal to the program.

TWC is now in the process of raising the criminal justice program to full major status. Implementation, set to take effect next fall, is delayed only while the school conducts a nationwide search for a department head with doctoral status, something Wallace lacks. Though he grew up two blocks from TWC, no one in Wallace's family had ever attended



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college. Neither had Wallace, until, as an adult he received a degree from Middle Tennessee State University and a master's from Tennessee State University.

Wallace says he'll continue to wield his robust range of contacts to offer TWC students access to college credit internships at no less than 12 criminal justice agencies across the South. He also plans to continue working with the TWC student body's newly formed Criminal Justice Club, a chapter of the American Criminal Justice Society. Via Wallace, club enrollees have recently visited TBI state headquarters (home of

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—LARRY WALLACE

the state's crime lab), Riverbend Maximum Security Prison (home to Tennessee's death row), the University of Tennessee's forensic "Body Farm" and Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary—one of oldest working state prisons in nation. Wallace has also brought high-profile dignitaries like Tennessee Supreme Court justice Gary Wade on campus to speak at monthly club meetings.

"I try to expose the students to all facets of the criminal justice system then let them make their own decisions about what facets they may like to go into for a career," Wallace states modestly.

Whether or not they'll turn out to be workaholics also remains an individual decision **tn**

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