

A Journey Toward Work-Life Balance

By Troy Newport



When Allison Lee of Boise-based Coatings Plus became an owner of a powder powder coating business, she didn't have a background in the powder coating industry. She did have tenacity, a positive attitude, and adventurous spirit. Eight years later, her adventure has just begun.

When she graduated from Western Washington University in Bellingham, WA, in December 2000, Allison Lee was like a lot of other college students and wasn't sure exactly where her career would take her. She had worked her way through college at a small local JCPenney store selling shoes. Knowing Allison's work ethic and sales success, her managers encouraged Allison to enroll in their management training program after graduation. "I don't know if it's a good thing or not, but they called me a 'little spitfire,'" Allison laughs. She follows up by saying she thinks her managers respected her ability to take sales initiatives and work hard toward accomplishing goals set for their department. "For me there is no fear—if there's something that needs to be done, I'm going to do it," she asserts.

In true form, Allison completed the training program ahead of schedule and was ready to tackle bigger challenges. The problem was that Allison's managers liked the job she had done at her store and wanted her to stay there rather than give her a well-earned promotion to run a larger store. Knowing her disappointment, one of her coworkers introduced Allison to her daughter, who worked for Sterling Jewelers. Allison soon found herself in another management training program, learning the ropes of the jewelry industry from the parent company of Kay Jewelers, Jared, and several other well-known specialty jewelers. This time Allison was given the challenge

of opening a new store in Missoula, MT, in 2003 as part of a broader corporate initiative to have a Sterling-owned store in all 50 states.

Armed with her knowledge of Sterling's five corporate standards that all store managers are supposed to achieve every year, Allison moved to Missoula ready to make her store a success. Her manager told her not to expect her store to be profitable in its first year, but that only gave Allison more motivation. Not only was she profitable in her first year, but she also hit all five of the corporate standards. With all that success, you would assume Allison would be quickly whisked away to a larger store and given even more responsibility. Oddly, she once again suffered from her success and management didn't want to move her away from her store. Eventually, however, Allison was moved to a new store in Boise, ID. Along with creating a six-figure salary for herself came the goal of hitting \$3M in revenue her first year. This was an extremely difficult and likely unattainable goal due to fact that another store was added right across the street. Determined to meet the challenge head on, Allison charged forward with all the verve you would expect.

Life, and Death

During her time in the Boise location Allison learned she was pregnant. She worked up until her son was born and was back at it soon after, chipping away at the unrealistic goals she inherited. As many of us can relate, work became an all-consuming chore for her, leaving little daylight for the things that really matter. Allison recounts, "I wasn't there for a lot of his firsts, his milestones, and it really started to weigh on me." With work pressures mounting and the regret of missing critical family moments, Allison mentally negotiated to exit her job; appropriately, she decided to be done after Mother's Day 2010. Before that milestone day could arrive, however, she received a devastating phone call at work that her son unexpectedly passed away.

Allison took time off to grieve and consider how she would take her next steps forward through life after being faced with such sudden anguish. Her husband was running a ministry that transitions men released from prison back into to the community, teaching transferrable job skills and building a reliable support network. Faith, family, and perseverance eventually brought her to a juncture where she was ready to think about returning to work. She negotiated a position in a non-supervisory role and returned to the Sterling Corporation.

Soon after returning to work, Allison found out she was pregnant. Not long after that, an unexpected opportunity presented itself to become an investor in a powder coating job shop. The job shop was part of a fabrication business, but the owners wanted to focus on the fab side and bring in an investor who would run the powder business. With a daughter on the way and no experience in the powder coating industry, Allison and her husband decided to take the plunge and buy into the "turnkey" business. The problem was that



After a successful career in retail jewelry, Allison Lee, pictured left, was ready to bring her fun and adventurous spirit to the powder coating industry.



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It was nice to be exposed to coaters that did things different than me. It gave me the opportunity to open my eyes into creating more effective production.



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the business wasn't so turnkey after all, and over time began to struggle. Having purchased the business in 2012, they decided Allison's invaluable experience in the corporate world was needed to turn things around. So, in 2014, her husband started focusing solely on his ministry and Allison left the retail jewelry world behind to embark on a new adventure in powder coating. To help with profitability, they renegotiated with the fab shop owners and purchased the business outright. Allison was now set on her path to building the business, paying herself the minimum wage of \$7.50 per hour in the process as that was all the business could afford.

Reinvention

It wasn't long into her foray running a powder coating business that Allison realized they needed to refine their processes and improve quality. She was learning a new industry, so she wanted to learn the right way to do it. She says she recalls thinking, "There's got to be a book for this." Then she found PCI's *Powder Coating: The Complete Finisher's Handbook*. Soon after, she hired Shivie Dhillon as a consultant to provide professional guidance on their processes and procedures.

"When you run a batch shop, it's hard to find consistency; everything is different every day," Allison explains. "There



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are so many gray areas,” she continues. “You have to keep building on your knowledge to troubleshoot issues. You find out someone washed their hands with a new soap, or a new oil was used, and that caused an issue. No day is the same.”

In addition to Shivie and the *PCI Handbook*, Allison says she leaned heavily on one of her suppliers, Leslee Robinson from Cardinal Paint and Powder. “When we first met, she warned me that I had no idea what I was walking into, but she didn’t know who she was talking to,” Allison laughs. “I’m someone who never walks away from a challenge.” Allison recalls, “I created flash cards and Leslee would help quiz me. She’s the one who taught me how to read a color card, and she was always available to explain things and help troubleshoot. I couldn’t have done it without her.”

Allison also got involved in industry associations such as PCI and CCAI. “At first I thought, ‘Can I afford this?’ And then I thought, ‘I can’t afford not to,’ and signed up for membership, which is really reasonable when you consider everything you get out of it.” Allison also joined a Peer Group. Going to association events was a new experience for her. “When I first started going to PCI events, I used to be the only woman there. Then I think I saw Anne Goyer at a meeting and I was like, ‘Hey, there’s one!’” She estimates that nowadays many events she attends have a more even number of men and women.

Allison also had the same workforce challenges the rest of the industry faces. “When I first got here, most of the employees would stay around 90 days. I was constantly training new workers.” Allison says the keys to employee retention were training and empowerment. “I’m involved actively in the business, but at the same time I work hard to empower employees so they can become more self-sufficient.”

That self-sufficiency was tested in 2018 when Allison suffered a cardiac arrest in her office, leaving her out of the daily grind for two months. “Overall, it went well, but there were definitely some areas I found that needed to be addressed when I came back,” Allison recalls. Besides learning where employees needed additional support when she’s not at the shop for extended periods, Allison was also reminded of the importance of work-life balance. “I was working 80 hours a week, selling my soul to attain all my goals, but money doesn’t buy happiness,” she reflects, adding, “I also want my employees to learn to have that same work-life balance.”

Allison has introduced profit-sharing for her employees, and she tries to promote upward mobility for her staff. “My office manager is a woman who worked her way up from the shop floor.” When asked if she frequently has women working for her, Allison replies, “Definitely, and we’ve had up to 50-50 men and women working in the shop at the same time.” Besides seeing more women in her shop and at powder coating events, Allison has also noticed more women in leadership positions throughout the powder coating industry. “Women have a different perspective, so as people learn to humble themselves to look at other perspectives, I think

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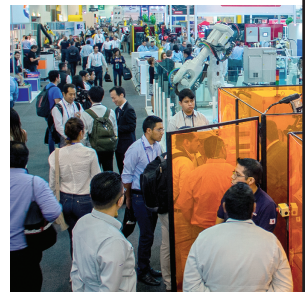
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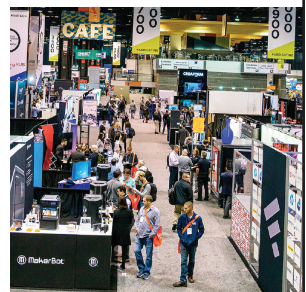
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Allison joined a Peer Group to jumpstart her education in the powder coating industry and build a network of knowledgeable colleagues.

women will continue to grow into more influential roles,” she posits. “Women have shown they can run an amazing household; if you know how to do that you can learn to run a powder coating business more efficiently.”

Allison’s own experiences mastering the powder coating industry inform her advice to women who are new to or are considering a career in the industry. “It’s like going into any work environment, really. Educate yourself. Be authentic. Be open.” She adds, “You have to learn the *what* and the *why*. Asking questions is necessary to understand the *why* before you try to change things. You have to earn and build trust—time and behavior is what will help you gain respect.” Allison has spent years doing exactly that.

Over the years of learning the ins and outs of the industry, she has seen the transformation of attitudes toward her and Coatings Plus. She says being honest and communicating with customers were key to building her company’s reputation. “Be up front and truthful from the beginning. If you can’t hit your dates you had better call them before they call you,” she advises. Now previous customers and other businesses refer new customers to Coatings Plus. She says when she hears new customers say they were told to ‘go speak to the girls over at Coatings Plus’ it gives her a sense of satisfaction. “They’ve learned to respect me over time because I follow through on what I say and I can give examples and explain why jobs should be done a certain way.”

As the company has grown and evolved, they were able to upgrade their 30-foot electric oven to a Rohner gas oven.

She says they plan on upgrading more equipment to make it easier for employees to do their jobs—a new overhead rail system, improved filtration system, and a new blast booth with recovery system. “Everything we do has been so manual, so I’m trying to make it more friendly for our aging bodies,” she laughs.

These days Allison tries to carve time out of her schedule to do some of the things she loves, like refinishing furniture, crafts, biking, and anything outdoors. “Things have been altered because of my heart issue, but I never say no to a new adventure. I wake up every morning between 4:30 and 7:30 so I have my own quiet time, and then I go to bed at 8:30 when my kids go to bed. I’ve had to learn how to create that lifestyle because it’s necessary.”

Allison and her staff wear the *Colossians 3:23* Bible verse on their sleeves as a daily reminder of work-life balance: “Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord, not for human masters.” When asked what she has learned over the years, Allison pauses for a few seconds and then says, “We’re never done learning, so humble yourself, whether it’s spiritually, physically, or mentally... and that’s when growth happens. While striving to be better.”

Troy Newport is publisher of Powder Coated Tough.

