

Irish Creek Creates Client Solutions Through Construction

The Berks family-owned business has grown 150% under the leadership of Sarah Phillips.



A sign hanging in Sarah Phillips' Muhlenberg Township office says, "If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door."

Phillips, 36, president of Irish Creek Enterprises, has built many doors during her career in the construction business, creating opportunities that resulted in significant company growth and recognition.

"I always knew that, as a woman in a male-dominated industry, I'd have to work a little harder," she said. "But I've always wanted to be the best person at whatever I took on, not the best woman."

Phillips, who grew up on her parents' farm — Irish Creek Farm in Centre Township — began considering career options as a student at Tulpehocken Area High School, where she took agricultural mechanics as an elective.

"We did electric work, welding, small engines, carpentry and general repair," she said. "I loved my ag mechanics classes."

Wondering if she could parlay the skills she'd acquired from those classes into a career, Phillips consulted with her father, David Phillips, who had founded Irish Creek as an excavation firm in 1993.

He suggested that Phillips try out her hand as a summer laborer with Irish Creek after graduating from high school, and she agreed.

"I found I really loved laboring in the field," Phillips recalled. "We did a lot of utility and trench work, and I just did whatever was needed."

As the youngest employee and only woman on the job site, Phillips recognized she'd need to perform well to achieve credibility with co-workers. She went out of her way as a team player, taking on jobs others didn't want, volunteering to work on weekends and staying late to finish a job.

"The phrase I'd repeat to myself was 'never say no,'" Phillips said. "I made it my job to make the job easier for others, and I think that earned me respect."



In this 2006 or 2007 photo, Sarah Phillips sits on the track of a crane while she was a laborer working for her family's business – Irish Creek Construction. She has been president of the company since 2022. (Photo Courtesy Sarah Phillips)

Phillips enrolled that fall at The Ohio State University, majoring in construction systems management with minors in agribusiness and construction management.

She'd spend her breaks working for Irish Creek and interned for a summer with a Berks County general contracting firm before graduating from college in 2010.

After graduating, Phillips accepted a job as a project manager with the firm where she'd interned and worked there for seven years.

"At that point, I was talking to my father about starting my own company," Phillips said. "He suggested maybe it was time for me to come back to Irish Creek," she said.

She rejoined the family business as a project manager in 2017 with a plan to expand the construction side of what was still primarily an excavation business. Phillips also had a goal of creating a higher level of customer service, something she perceived as lacking in the industry.

"We've worked hard to make sure we always put the needs of our customers first," she said. "Our whole goal is to help our customers grow their businesses and become more profitable."

She noted that 98% of their customers are repeat or referrals to the company.

Phillips was named president of Irish Creek in 2022, with plans to continue growing the company.

Currently employing between 20 and 30 workers, Phillips is excited about the potential for hiring others.

"I'd like to see how many people we can employ and how many Berks County families we can help support," she said. "We're a very family-oriented company."

Under her leadership, the company has grown 150% and expanded beyond Pennsylvania to include New Jersey, Delaware and Ohio.

Services now include commercial and industrial general construction, construction management, excavation and site management.

Irish Creek has twice been included on the Inc 5000 List of Fastest Growing Privately Held Companies and is a five-time recipient of the Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce's Business Excellence awards.

David Phillips, 71, who remains involved in all company activity, is proud of his daughter's accomplishments and thrilled to be working alongside her. "It means everything to me to have a family member want to take over this business," he said.



Sarah Phillips, owner and president of Irish Creek Construction in Muhlenberg Township, with her dogs Sass, left, and Jade. (BILL UHRICH – MEDIANEWS GROUP)

While he readily supports her efforts, Phillips is quick to give space to his daughter for new ideas and ways of operating.

"I'm very conscious that she needs to be able to do it her way," he said.

"She learned the business from the ground up and she's ready to move it forward."

He also enjoys the company of her dogs, Jade and Sass, who accompany Phillips to work every day. Visitors to the "Our Team" section of the Irish Creek website have found that the dogs hold official positions with the company, and their photos appear on the company website. Jade is director of office greetings and lunch inspector, while Sass is director of morale and greeter.