

Manuel and Albertina Luis founded the M. Luis Construction Co. in 1985, just six years after they emigrated from Portugal to the U.S. The sisters assumed company ownership in 2008, but their parents remain active in the company and all four still discuss major decisions.



# A SECOND GENERATION OF SUCCESS:

## LUIS SISTERS TAKING THEIR BUSINESS IN NEW DIRECTIONS

by Mary Lou Jay

**E**arlier this year, *Enterprising Women* magazine announced the selection of Cidalia Luis-Akbar and Natalia Luis, president and vice president, respectively, of M. Luis Construction Co., as winners of its 2013 Enterprising Women of the Year Award. It's the latest in a series of recognitions for the pair, who transformed the road construction company founded by their parents into a service-oriented business that can help contractors achieve their MBE and WBE goals.

The history of the Luis family and their company is a story of immigrant success.

"My parents came to this country in 1979 with two daughters, a green

card and the promise of building the American dream," said Cidalia. None of them spoke English.

Manuel, an artisan in structural construction in Portugal, found work with a road contractor. Albertina attended school at night to learn English and business management. They started the M. Luis Construction Co. in 1985 with a truck and a wheelbarrow as company assets.

"My father is a great artisan, but my mother is the one with the business acumen and the guts to get it done," said Cidalia. Although her parents had come from a patriarchal society, "my father knew he had an extraordinary wife whom he believed in and trusted

implicitly to take the reins of this impossible task of starting a business in a foreign country."

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Although the sisters worked in the company during their teens, neither anticipated a construction career. Cidalia earned undergraduate degrees in economics and Spanish language and literature, and Master's degrees in Portuguese and Spanish literature. She studied in Brazil as a Fulbright Hayes scholar, planning a career in diplomacy

and foreign service. Natalia was aimed at international business, graduating from Smith Business School at the University of Maryland with degrees in international business and in marketing.

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After graduation, however, instead of accepting one of several other job opportunities, Natalia decided to take her parents’ “very generous” offer of a position at their company. Cidalia made a similar decision a short time later. That was in the mid-1990s.

Being the children of the owner didn’t earn the sisters much leeway.

“My parents offered me a job with a one-year contract—renewable every year, if they chose to renew it,” said Cidalia. “I didn’t like it much the first few years; I could see the potential, but it was so limiting because we didn’t have the resources to really move ahead. Our dreams were bigger than our pocketbooks.”

Her attitude changed in the third year. “The light bulb went on,” Cidalia said. “We realized that we were the only women doing this, and that we really could make a difference...This wasn’t just about a job or just about the work; this was about the fact that we were girls in a really non-traditional industry, and the result would be much larger than the sum of its parts if we stuck it out.”

The Luis sisters learned all aspects of running a contracting company at their



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parents’ firm and at American Hauling and Paving, which they opened in 2000. “We wore so many hats, but I tended to take over the financial aspects of the company and Natalia the operational aspects,” said Cidalia. “We went through every single ring in our company to be where we are today as owners and as president and vice president.”

Through those experiences they gained not only an appreciation and respect for the work their employees do but also

a thorough understanding of how a business functions from the bottom up.

#### **Moving Towards a Service Model**

Cidalia and Natalia assumed ownership of M. Luis Construction Co. in 2008. The business continues to provide a broad range of road construction and maintenance services to state and local governments, but the sisters are redirecting its focus to concentrate on becoming a first priority subcontractor to general contractors.

In 2010 they bought an asphalt manufacturing facility in Rockville, Maryland, making M. Luis Construction Co. the only MBE- and WBE-certified asphalt manufacturer in the state.

"It was a strategic plan for us at least 10 years ago, and it's been a great success," said Cidalia. "We've been able to bring a completely different consciousness to the industry than existed before, because we're still contractors and subcontractors."

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Natalia says the plant's asphalt is competitively priced and can meet all required specs. Contractors who buy from their plant also get a boost towards meeting their MBE and WBE goals. "That's extremely important when you're working on highway or heavy maintenance programs with 25 to 30 percent goal allocations," she added.

Contractors that use the company's paving services get similar benefits.

"As GCs try to work with minority- and women-owned business programs within their contract specifications, using someone like M. Luis Construction Co. for both the asphalt sales as well as the paving makes so much sense," Natalia said. "It allows them to easily meet or exceed their goals without stretching themselves by using 10 or 15 different subcontractors; it allows them to logistically manage their projects much more efficiently."



M. Luis Construction Co. has just launched a new hydrovac division, which offers excavation services that utilize high-power water pressure. This division, also WBENC-certified, serves utility companies such as BGE, Verizon, Pepco and Dominion, and the contractors who work with them.

"We've gotten a couple of really great clients and are looking forward to expanding that business service area," said Natalia.

"We love being a positive component of the equation for GCs," she said. "We understand from a very fundamental place where they are coming from, their administrative and their operational processes, and why they need the documentation that they need. We can provide a wonderful service for them."

#### **Choosing Their Square**

Like other construction business owners, the Luis sisters are concerned about the growing government intervention in their industry and about forced Project Labor Agreements (PLAs).

"Eighty-seven percent of our companies and of our employees work for merit shop businesses; we are being forced and cajoled to do things that will only cost our state and our community money and deliver less project value," said Cidalia. She's also disturbed about the forced

first source hiring agreements that many local jurisdictions are enacting.

Being women in a male-dominated industry also has been difficult at times.

"But the fact is, we chose to be in that square—an industry where there aren't a lot of female counterparts," said Natalia. "It's a challenge that we chose to take on." They have been accepted, she believes, as other companies see that they take their jobs seriously and that they perform work at the same level of quality, efficiency and competitiveness as their male-led counterparts.

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"I like that we are breaking ground," added Cidalia. "I'm hoping that we are paving an extra-ordinary way for other women to follow, and that other women exceed what we've done in laying down that foundation work in our industry."

"But I also have to say thank you to our wonderful male peers who are not afraid to let us play in the proverbial sandbox, who choose to help us, to reach out a hand and guide. There have been some extraordinary men we have met along the way who have guided us and helped us get a door open and weren't afraid that in doing so we would become successful or a threat to them," she added.

#### **Complementary Partners**

One difficulty the sisters haven't faced is family squabbling.

"Natalia and I are good friends and first and foremost we are sisters," said Cidalia. They live on the same street, and share a very real joy in their families. Cidalia and her husband, Masud, have a three-year-old daughter Sophia Beatriz; Natalia and her husband Antonio have two sons, Antonio, age 9, and Gabriel, age 6.

Despite these similarities, the sisters see business matters in a different light.

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"That brings to the table an extraordinary resource," said Cidalia. "Any time we have a meeting with a customer or we're at a conference, my version of what has occurred is 180 percent complementary to my sister's version of events. So we walk out of any meeting with a very holistic view...it's part of the ingredients to the secret sauce.

"We may disagree, and we agree to disagree, but we do it in as respectful a way as we can."

They learned that respect for dissenting opinions from their parents, who allowed them to voice differing ideas as long as they could back them up with good arguments. The sisters still discuss important decisions with their parents, who remain active in the company's operations.

"They come to work because that is their hobby," said Cidalia. "My mother's idea of not being at work full time is taking a day off during the week. My

father's idea of not being the owner of the company is starting at 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. instead of 4:00 or 4:30 a.m."

The sisters appreciate the trust and the guidance that their parents continue to provide. "That was especially helpful in the early days and in the last few years where there have been some very difficult times for our industry. They've been through difficult times more than once, and they have been beacons of knowledge and information for us," Cidalia added.

### **Planning for Growth**

Cidalia and Natalia have prepared themselves for the challenges ahead through continuous business education (they've attended programs at Dartmouth, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and the Wharton Business School among others) and through active participation in professional organizations. Cidalia is a member of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) of Metro Washington board of directors and Natalia serves on the board of the Maryland Minority Contractors Association. On a national level, they're active in the Women's Business Enterprise National Council, the Women Presidents' Organization and the National Association of Women Business Owners.

They participate in many charitable organizations as well. Both serve on the board of the Children's National Medical Center. Cidalia is on the board of the FBI's Citizen's Academy, an outreach program for high-risk children, and serves on the board of the Ayenda Foundation, which recently built a school for boys and girls in Afghanistan. Natalia is on the board of the Latino Students Fund, serves on the board of her children's schools and chairs the Building and Ground

Committee for Beauvoir, the National Cathedral elementary school.

Despite schedules already jammed with work and family commitments, they believe that such activities are essential.

"You have to give back," said Cidalia. "You integrate; you don't even try to balance."

The sisters' success in integrating the various aspects of their lives is evident in the many recognitions they have earned. M. Luis Construction was featured in the June 2011 issue of Forbes, and Natalia and Cidalia were the cover story for Washington SmartCEO magazine in July 2011. Cidalia was named one of Maryland's Top 100 Women that same year by the Daily Record.

Their plans for growth make it likely there will be other such recognitions in the future.

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"I would like for our company to be the premiere contractor and supplier—both as a GC and as a sub," said Cidalia. "I'd like for us to develop and to add on to our service program. I'd like for us to go from local to regional and perhaps even national in delivering our services."

"We want to have best practice be protocol in every way possible," added Natalia. "To really stay very current with market means and market expectations and to be a leading agent opposed to a following one." ■