

## BUSINESS

# Houston power couple electrifies energy community

By ALICE ADAMS

There's a rule at the Zlotnik home that applies, exclusively, to parents Bob and Marcie.

"We don't talk about work, once we leave the office, and we don't bring personal issues from home," said Marcie, a vivacious and business savvy wife and mother with a degree from The University of Texas, her CPA and, at a relatively young age, an impressive track record for founding and running successful ventures.

Working side by side, the Zlotniks lead the vibrant new StarTex Power Corp., a state-wide retail energy provider and, to their knowledge, the only woman-owned force to be found in the Lone Star state's retail electricity market today.

"We don't talk about anything work-related after business hours unless it's about something positive," said Bob, her partner in business as well as in life with an equally impressive professional track record of his own. "Our time away from the office is focused, almost totally, on our family and that includes coaching sports and just the enjoyment of watching them grow up."

Born in El Campo, Texas, Bob attended UT, where he earned a BBA

in accounting, his CPA and a master's degree in finance.

Marcie, who was born in Montreal, moved with her family to Texas in 1977 because of political unrest in Quebec. She attended Bellaire High School and majored in accounting at UT.

When Bob, who was involved in recruiting for an accounting firm visited his alma mater in Austin, Marcie was one of the young talents he interviewed. When she accepted a job offer and joined the firm's Houston office, the two became friends before they eventually began dating and later were married. That was 21 years – and three sons – ago.

In 2002, when electric utilities were deregulated in Texas, this tenacious couple saw beyond the traditional to new opportunities on the horizon and in June 2004, founded StarTex Power. Their goal: to be the "David" in a business arena shared by "Goliaths" like Reliant Energy and TXU.

As president and CEO, Robert is responsible for the overall direction of the company, its long-term strategic goals, corporate finance and investor relations.

Marcie, who is president and COO, oversees the day-to-day operations of the company as well as its

sales and retail regulatory affairs.

So, how did this Houston couple find itself in the retail power business?

For a very simplistic explanation, look at the various long-distance telephone service providers, once long-distance service was deregulated. At one point, MCI, AT&T and Sprint were offering long distance service. However, Southwestern Bell was the constant in the picture, providing local telephone service.

In the energy business, electricity is sent to customers by a company that is regulated – like Reliant or TXU. Each month, an individual from that company reads your meter. "Then they send the reading to us," Marcie explained. "We handle the billing, customer service, collections and marketing – and we can service anywhere in the state of Texas where electrical power has been deregulated."

StarTex began with 5,000 customers in 2004. Today, the company's staff of 45 employees serves more than 25,000 customers – and counting.

"Our challenge is to differentiate ourselves from other providers," Marcie said, "and much of what we do involves helping customers get to know about us. That happens in a couple of ways. After deregulation, the Public Utility Commission of Texas established a website called [thepowertochoose.com](http://thepowertochoose.com). Here you can type in your ZIP code and it gives you the electric providers in your area and what they're charging."

Consumers can choose the provider they want to have and then sign up. The changeover is automatic.

But, isn't it a risk to buy service from a smaller company, especially if there's a storm and a power outage results?

Marcie is quick to quell any uneasiness about transitioning from doing business with a power giant to a small energy company like

StarTex. "For example, if there's a power outage due to a storm, I'm in my house and I have no service but, no matter whom I buy my electrical power from, my neighbors have no service either. This part of the electricity is still regulated and is taken care of by Reliant or TXU."

So, what's their secret formula for the success they've realized in such a short time?

"In this business, integrity is important," Marcie said. "Maybe our customers like the fact that Bob and I are married and trustworthy – and that goes a long way. But, it's our passion to be the best, to provide extraordinary service. In each of the companies I've started, I've been passionate, but much of our success also has come because we have great employees. It's the human element, and some have worked with us for 14 years."

Bob said, like his wife, he also has passion about their business although he describes his as somewhat different from Marcie's. "It comes from putting together an idea and rolling it up into a company that we're going to be proud of, that our employees and investors are proud of. It's similar to having kids – watching them evolve – and as they head off to college – knowing they've got what it takes."

Enjoying recent visibility in a number of local and national media, the couple agreed one of their greatest challenges is convincing customers there's no change in service, no service degradation when they choose to do business with a young, new and aggressive company.

"They're still nervous," Marcie acknowledged, "so education, to me, is the single biggest concern we have, but we have great people who are happy being here and we have customers who like being our customers," she added. "We get emails about how easy our bills are to understand, how much fun it is to be a customer – and we take pride in that." □