

CISSE SPRAGINS

Competitive by nature, the owner of Rockwell Labs isn't content simply being a successful entrepreneur. She wants to leave a legacy of innovation to the pest management industry.

Despite the high-profile nature of her position, Cisse Spragins, owner and CEO of Rockwell Labs Ltd, North Kansas City, Mo., isn't particularly comfortable being in the spotlight. An introvert by nature, Spragins understands that managing a business requires a commitment to be "out front" at industry trade shows and educational events, even when it runs counter to your personality. As a result, she has always done whatever it takes to drive the business, a quality she shares with other successful entrepreneurs in the pest management industry.

THE EARLY YEARS. Spragins' independent spirit and win-at-all-costs personality is rooted in her small-town upbringing, tending horses on her grandparents' farm in Jackson, Tenn. Her father, Beau, grew up in the region before joining the Air Force, where he met and married Spragins' mother, Orkide, while stationed in Istanbul, Turkey. The marriage was short-lived, but resulted in a lifelong bond between father and daughter.

"My mother left when I was only a year old," Spragins says rather matter-of-factly. "I've only seen or spoken to her a few times." Into the void stepped her grandmother and grandfather, a circuit court judge who wanted Spragins to become a lawyer, assuring her that "there's always room at the top" and imploring his young granddaughter, "Don't ever be a dumb blonde."

While Spragins never pursued a law degree, she did develop a lifelong passion for horses during those formative years on the farm. "Since I was so introverted and socially inept, being around animals provided me with companionship at an important time in my life," she recalls. "It also was good from a work ethic standpoint since they were entirely my responsibility. When I was about 10, my dad told me he couldn't afford horse feed anymore, so I had to take care of that myself. I spent a couple of summers raking hay by hand after the fields were mowed and putting it in big garbage bags to

take back to the barn. I also sold vegetables from our large garden and baby sat," she says, devoting most of her free time to riding horses.

Over time, Spragins became quite adept at show jumping, a skill — like many things in her life — that was self-taught. "My family didn't have a lot of money, so there weren't a lot of opportunities to compete or take riding lessons," she says, although that didn't stop her from entering various competitions whenever she could scrape together the necessary registration fees.

Although more comfortable around her beloved horses than her classmates, Spragins — blessed with a naturally inquisitive mind — excelled in high school. She exhibited a particular affinity for the sciences because "I enjoy figuring things out," she says.

Ever the pragmatist, Spragins doesn't view science as purely an intellectual exercise, the pursuit of knowledge with no apparent goal. At the end of the day, the scientific process needs to result in something tangible, she says. "Whenever I take those personality tests, they'll say I'm very contemplative in a purposeful way. I don't like to deal in just an abstraction. I like an end result that will allow me to see my vision put to practical use. I think that sums me up pretty well."

A gifted student, Spragins graduated from high school at the age of 16, enrolling at the University of Tennessee (Martin) in hopes of one day becoming a veterinarian. "I started at UT Martin in pre-vet, but after 18 months I changed my major to chemistry. I decided to pursue the sciences rather than spend my days putting thermometers in dogs' rear ends," she says with a laugh, exhibiting a sardonic sense of humor.

As in high school, Spragins graduated from college a year early, earning an undergraduate degree in chemistry at the age of 19, immediately enrolling in the graduate program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. "I chose UW-Madison because it was rated number four in the nation in chemistry," she says, "and the fact I didn't get into Harvard."

Undaunted, Spragins earned a Master's degree in chemistry in 1985 and a second Master's degree in



physics in 1988. “I liked the academic life for a while, but it got old,” she said. “I originally thought the best students go on to become professors at major universities and that’s what I thought I should do. That was my original plan, but ultimately I got a little tired of it; I realized I wanted to do something more practical with my life.”

A LIFE-CHANGING MEETING. In a strange twist of fate, Spragins’ dual love of horses and the sciences intersected when she met Malcolm Stack, founder and president of Bell Laboratories, at a local horse show. “I had a horse I brought up from Tennessee that I boarded in a stable in Madison,” she recalls of the chance meeting that would change her life. “The stable had two or three horse shows a year and Malcolm (who passed away in 2006) took lessons from the instructor that worked at our stable,” Spragins said.

“One day, I heard somebody ask, ‘What does that guy do?’ And someone said, ‘He owns a company.’ While waiting to compete, I asked him what kind of company he owned and he said, ‘A chemical company,’ and I told him I had a Master’s degree in chemistry. We left it at that.”

A couple of months later, when Bell Laboratories embarked on several new research initiatives, Stack thought back to his brief conversation with the young chemistry student, offering her a free-lance assignment in the firm’s lab if she was interested.

“I told them, as long as you let me work my own hours, I’ll be able to help,” she says. “In addition to doing some basic research synthesizing technical bromadiolone, which was coming off patent, I got involved in various product development projects, and I discovered I really liked it. I liked it so much I started directing a number of the studies,” Spragins says with a laugh, “because that’s what I do,” acknowledging her control-oriented nature.

Impressed with her work ethic and scientific acumen, Bell offered Spragins a full-time position in 1991, which eventually culminated in her appointment as technical director, managing the company’s chemistry and biology labs, as well overseeing its regulatory and product registration activities. “My work was pretty all consuming at the time,” Spragins recalls, but she enjoyed every minute, while simultaneously earning a Ph.D in physics in 1992.

THE NEXT CHAPTER. In the mid-1990s, as Bell expanded its international footprint, Spragins again embraced the challenge, taking on more global responsibilities for the company and eventually moving to England to serve as director of international business. “England was great,” she says, but after three years, she was ready to move on, this time on her own.

“My motivation wasn’t to prove myself to other people, but to prove something to myself,” she says. “I was incredibly committed to Bell; I worked my tail off for the company, but I knew starting my own business was something I had to do. It was an extremely hard decision. I kept thinking how am I going to walk into Malcolm’s office and tell him I was leaving?”

Ultimately, she summoned the courage, paving the way for the creation of Rockwell Labs, a company, no doubt, Malcolm Stack would admire for its entrepreneurial excellence and commitment to innovation, two qualities embodied by her longtime mentor. PCT recently sat down with Spragins to learn more about what motivated this first-generation entrepreneur to start her own business, as well as her plans for the future.

Q. Was the prospect of opening the doors to your own business a bit daunting when you launched Rockwell Labs?

A. I always felt I could be successful owning my own business. Like Malcolm,



Executive Spotlight

Name: Dr. Cisse Spragins

Title: Owner/Chief Executive Officer

Company: Rockwell Labs Ltd

Headquarters: North Kansas City, Mo.

Professional Accomplishments: B.S., chemistry, University of Tennessee, Martin, 1983; Master’s, chemistry and physics, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1985, 1988; Ph.D., plasma physics, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1992; Treasurer, United Producers, Formulators & Distributors Association (UPF&DA); Immediate Past President, Pi Chi Omega.

Personal: Enjoys equestrian sports, home renovation, antiques and politics; married to husband Sean O’Toole.

I’ve always been very driven, so I figured I would be successful. I gave Malcolm a year’s notice, but it wasn’t easy leaving the company. I enjoyed working for Bell Laboratories, but I was becoming less and less happy with myself for not having the courage to start my own business. I felt like it was something I had to do or I wasn’t going to be able to live with myself.

Q. How did you select the name Rockwell Labs?

A. I love horses, so as strange as it may seem, there’s an equine connection to my company name. In 1992, I attended the Olympic Trials for dressage and saw this guy riding a horse that was very handsome and his name was Gary V. Rockwell. I remember liking the sound of his name, so when trying to think of a company name, it just came to me. My mind works that way. I often put disparate things together.



“When Malcolm Stack introduced us to Cisse Spragins, we already knew she was special. His confidence in this young industry leader was well placed as she has far exceeded the most ambitious entrepreneur model. Cisse has shared her expertise with UPF&DA, serving on our Board of Directors for many years and loyally supporting the Association.” — Valera Jessee

Q That's remarkable *and* random. How does your decision-making process benefit Rockwell Labs in other ways?

A. I think my ability to put disparate concepts together is beneficial for developing new products. I'm always asking myself, "How would that active ingredient or formulation relate to that active ingredient or formulation? Will they work synergistically to control pests?" I'm not always sure they will, but I'm inquisitive enough to seek out the answers to those questions.

Q. What were those first weeks like upon deciding to start your own company?

A. Nothing could have prepared me for running my own business. I was venturing into unknown territory. I had to move back to the U.S. where I wasn't very well known, so it was like being naked. During the time I was in Europe, I was very visible, you might even say famous in the microcosm of pest control. People there were shocked I was leaving Bell Laboratories. They said, "Why wouldn't you stay there the rest of your career?" They thought I had lost my mind, but they didn't understand the mindset of an entrepreneur. Even though I was well known in Europe, not many people knew me in the United States, where I had been with Bell largely in a technical capacity. In some people's minds my position in Europe was somewhat glamorous and you develop a confidence associated with that pretense. In leaving Bell, I knew I would be stripped of any pretense. It was only going to be me and I would be starting from ground zero. No one in the U.S. pest control market cared if I was going to be successful or not, and why should they? They didn't know me, so I knew any success I had was going to be based solely on my hard work and talent. While that was very scary, it also was very liberating.

Q. Why was it so important to you to achieve success on your own?

A. I always felt Bell Laboratories was a great company and it's a lot easier to look great when you work for a great company. But when you start your own business it's only you. My success or failure was going to be up to me. I wasn't going to be standing on anyone else's shoulders this time. It was a very unsettling feeling, but I thought I was up to it. At the end of the day, it's all about the work. You start by taking that first step.

Q. What were some of the lessons you learned at Bell Laboratories?

A. When I was working in Europe, people used to ask what the secret was to Bell's success? I would say, "They've done almost everything right for 25 years. That's the secret to their success!" There's not a magic bullet. It's basically a matter of trying to do most things right every day, and that's what we're trying to do at Rockwell Labs.

Q. Why did you decide to stay in the pest management industry rather than launch a business in another industry?

A. Well, first and foremost, I had relationships in the pest control industry and I have enormous respect for the profession. I like helping these guys do their job. I imagine there are a lot of industries I could enjoy and where I could be successful, but I really like working in the pest management industry because there are so many nice people in it. This industry is full of good people and I honestly believe what PMPs do has a lot of value to society. I also like the fact it's an entrepreneurial industry. A guy can work at Orkin or Terminix and start his own pest control business if he has the gumption to do it. It's going to take a lot of hard work, but the opportunity is there if he — or she — is willing to seize it.

Q. What was the one thing that kept you up at night in those early days?

A. My primary concern was I didn't know anything about insects since I had spent my entire career up to that point in rodents. But if I wanted to stay in the industry, I couldn't focus on rodent control due to my non-compete with Bell Laboratories. Since baiting was becoming popular on the insect side of the business — and I knew a lot about the subject — it made sense that my first product would be the D-Sect IPM Station. I knew from my work with rodent bait stations that there was a market for tamper-resistant bait stations and monitoring stations. It was very much a bleeding edge product at the time it was introduced. It's not our best-selling product by any stretch, but it addressed a market need and was a place to start. And that was important for me at the time...to start.

Q. How did you decide what other products you would introduce?

A. Our first formulated product was InVite Liquid Lure, an attractant for small flies and yellow jackets. I chose to introduce that product because it was a significant niche market that didn't have a lot of product competition at the time. I decided

early on I wanted to be the goddess of fruit fly control. It was an evolving market, but there weren't a lot of folks focusing on it.

Q. In previous conversations, you mentioned Rockwell Labs took off in 2002 with the introduction of InTice Sweet Ant Gel. Why do you think that was the case?

A. I think it was a combination of good timing and a good product. People were accustomed to using cockroach baits, so PMPs were familiar with the concept of baiting. Ant baits were still fairly early in their development, so the majors didn't



Rockwell Labs Ltd received a 2012 Keystone Award from the Clay County (Kansas City, Mo.) Economic Development Council. The award, which was presented to Cisse Spragins (second from left), recognizes businesses and organizations that improve the economic environment and quality of life through new locations or expansions and job creation.

know a hell a lot more about it than I did. In addition, at the time ants were becoming more of a problem, so the timing was good to introduce a new bait product designed specifically for ants.

Q. Has your business evolved as you had anticipated since 2000?

A. I would say both yes and no. I never envisioned I would be making biological cleaners, but that's becoming an increasingly important part of our business. That's an example of Rockwell Labs addressing market opportunities in a proactive fashion. I started developing attractants and lures, but after understanding that market a bit better, it became clear that was not the way to address the issue. The company was formed to look at pest problems from an IPM perspective. What is the best way, from a holistic perspective, to get control of a particular pest problem? I think I've been true to that mission. Any products we

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sell are going to be IPM-oriented.

Q. With all the mergers and acquisitions activity that is going on in the pest control marketplace, have you had any interest expressed in your company?

A. We've had several companies express an interest in our business, but that's where my independent nature comes in. It's hard for me to swallow giving up financial control of my business. I've never had investors and I've never had debt, aside from buying this building, which is personal debt. I don't want my life controlled by bankers any more than anyone else.

Q. As a company that started with virtually no name recognition 13 years ago, how did you nurture Rockwell's relationship with distribution?

A. You have to understand that I was irrelevant to distributors when I started the business. After all, what value did I bring to them? Absolutely nothing! That was the harsh reality starting out. I knew I was going to have to build credibility with them over time, so that's what I set out to do.

They have to feel comfortable selling your products. It's easy to sell a Bayer or BASF product because they've been in the market a long time and have developed a deep reservoir of market credibility. Distributors have to be comfortable selling a Rockwell product and they have to be confident it's going to work as advertised or their customer isn't going to want to do business with them. You also have to keep distribution supplied with product once you develop credibility with the end-user, and we've never left anybody short in terms of meeting demand. That would be a disaster. Over time, we've developed credibility with distribution, so it's much easier today than when I started the business. Having said that, a couple of distributors gave me the benefit of the doubt early on, and that's something I'll never forget.

Q. At the end of your career, what would you like your legacy to be?

A. From the day I started Rockwell Labs my overarching objective was to try to shape the future of pest control. I wanted to build a great company, but I also wanted

to contribute to the industry's growth and development. That was my strategic vision. The market is dynamic enough, you have to go out and experience it, and you have to be willing to adapt. If you're an executive at a major corporation, you have the luxury of time to put a formal business plan in place and test your market assumptions before introducing a product. That's one of the good things about working for a major corporation. But if you're an entrepreneur, you have a vision, but limited financial resources at your disposal, so you have to take advantage of market opportunities as they arise. You need to be nimble enough to respond quickly to any changes in the marketplace, so you can take maximum advantage of those opportunities. I think we've done that as a company. **PCT**

To read additional Q&A with Cisse Spragins, visit www.pctonline.com and click on "online extras." Also check out the PCT iPad app in the iTunes store for additional content!

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- pruritic macules or papules
 - Erythematous (red)
3. Complex (Bullous)—include immediate, late and delayed components
- persists for days or weeks
 - pruritic, painful, may leave residual scarring and/or hyperpigmentation
 - of 357 photographs from the Internet, 6 percent (21) were bullous
4. Anaphylaxis (rare)
- A serious allergic reaction characterized by rapid onset and may cause death

While acknowledging the challenges inherent with bed bug work, White is optimistic the industry is getting a better handle on bed bugs thanks to new product introductions, university research and a newer generation of service professionals who have been dealing with bed bugs since entering the industry. "Bed bug work is an opportunity for us as an industry to truly enact IPM," he said.

Other highlights from the Purdue conference included:



Attendees of this year's Purdue Pest Management Conference gathered in front of the Stewart Center for the annual group photo.

- Purdue recognized long-time attendee and conference supporter Bob Dold Sr., of Rose Pest Solutions, Chicago. Dold has been an active association member at the local, state and national level and is a past president of the National Pest Management Association. He and wife Judy are frequent speakers at industry conferences, including Purdue. Dold joined Rose Pest Solutions after receiving his MBA from Denison University, rising through the ranks to become president. Rose Pest Solutions is currently led by President Bob Dold, Jr., the third generation of Dolds.
- Pi Chi Omega announced that it will be awarding a total of four scholarships

in 2013. Three scholarships will be in the amount of \$2,000; a fourth scholarship, the "Dr. John V. Osmun Memorial Scholarship," will be awarded in the amount of \$3,000.

- Purdue's Fred Whitford reviewed safety issues related to measuring pesticides, as well as the pH of water used in mixes, leaking tanks and other current hot topics related to safety. Harvey Goldglantz, Pest Control Marketing Company, gave a presentation titled, "How to Run a Small Business." Goldglantz reviewed hiring, firing and other personnel issues and how these issues impact the success of small business. — *Brad Harbison PCT*