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From the Sept. 2006 Issue

Every professional finds his or her own path in the accounting profession, but the road chosen by Hennie and Margaret van Bulck has been one of the least traveled. The married couple are the principal partners behind Van Bulck & Company, CPAs in Sumter, South Carolina. The success of their partnership, in their practice and marriage, stems from their mutual intellectual respect and curiosity, as well as their independence, which has led them to each have specialties that complement the other.

But let's start at the beginning. When a young Hendrikus van Bulck (Hennie) came to the United States from the Netherlands in 1972 as part of an academic exchange program, his intent was to complete his MBA at the University of Georgia (UGA). He accomplished this degree and went on to earn a Ph.D. in International Business, but his most rewarding achievement was in the partnership that the Dutchman forged with a Southern Belle named Margaret West.

Firm Name: Van Bulck & Company, CPAs

Location: Sumter, South Carolina

Websit: www.vanbulckcpas.com

PRODUCTIVITY SCORE™ — 400

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www.cpatechadvisor.com/productivity.)

The two met as a result of a double date arranged by a friend while Margaret was attending Westminster School, a preparatory academy in Atlanta, and Hennie

was at UGA. The personal and professional lives of the two have been deeply

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all but about the first two years of their 30-year marriage, even sharing an office at St. Andrews for a time. But the two started to think about “the rest of our lives,” and knew it was time for a change. Margaret’s father had an accounting practice in Sumter, so Hennie and Margaret both left their teaching positions to work for her father and take courses to prepare for the CPA exam. They both earned their credentials in 1985 and took over her father’s practice a year later.

“This was still in the time when we used service bureaus for tax preparation,” said Hennie while recalling the first tax season that he and his wife were in practice. “I remember filling out input sheets and sending them to the service bureau, working until midnight or later.” He also laughs about the first real error he made. “It was late, and I had been filling out K-1s for what seemed like hours, and I copied the K-1 sample data by mistake and submitted it to the bureau!” Margaret was also challenged early on as the partner responsible for obtaining new clients and building business relationships without her father’s name to stand on.

Things have progressed a long way since those early days, with the practice now serving hundreds of personal and business clients, specializing in providing payroll and accounting services to small businesses, with a focus on physicians and legal firms (Hennie’s specialties), and providing fiduciary and estate tax and consulting services (Margaret’s specialties). In addition to both being CPAs with advanced degrees, Hennie is accredited as a business valuation professional. His Ph.D. and personal experience in business further strengthen his consulting capabilities.

As Hennie describes his niche, “I don’t claim to be the smartest

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at their best.” So she assists clients with planning wills and trusts, living wills, and durable and healthcare powers of attorney. She works with their legal counsel to see that these documents are prepared to best meet the needs of her clients.

Technology has played a significant role in building and maintaining the practice, from using virtual office technologies and remote data backup, to online portals for clients. Hennie recalls the event that stressed the importance of keeping data stored in a safe place: “When Hurricane Hugo hit in 1989, our power was out and the computers were down, but our clients still needed their payroll.” The events of September 11, during which time Hennie was stranded while on vacation

in Holland, reinforced the notion of business continuation, he said, because whatever the disaster, it is imperative for any business to get up and running as soon as possible in order to survive.

Adopting the virtual office technologies wasn’t an option for their firm; it was a necessary investment that has proven valuable not only in offering security, but also in client service benefits. Their use of various technologies to enhance firm productivity earned Van Bulck & Company, CPAs a score of 400 on the Productivity Survey, an excellent achievement considering the size of the practice, which has a total staff of five including Hennie and Margaret.

Running any small business can be demanding, and accountants know that running one that other businesses depend on is especially so. But Hennie and Margaret still make time to spend with only each other, with recent vacations to Hawaii and Bermuda, as well as a condo on the South Carolina coast. Hennie also volunteers as a Troop leader with the Boy Scouts and serves on the Executive Committee

and as treasurer for the Sumter YMCA. His model trains were dismantled during

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for client issues.” When not in the office, she is likely to be at her studio in the woods near Bishopville, or trekking across the country with her camera. Her photographic passion has taken her throughout the Southwest United States, as well as Oregon, Cape Cod and Maine.

The couple also has two children, both of whom are away at college. Marc, who graduated from Emerson College in Boston, is now pursuing a Masters of Divinity at Columbia Theological Seminary. Daughter Sydney is pursuing a degree in elementary education at the College of Charleston. So whenever needed, they have two additional excuses to travel for holidays or an extended weekend.

Along with Margaret's decreased presence in the office, the practice is about to undergo another change: Hennie has just accepted an offer to return to teaching at USC Sumter, which he plans on doing in addition to running his practice. “I love the contact with the students, and this gives me the opportunity to get out of the office and connect with young minds again,” he said. It will also provide him with additional guaranteed income and benefits that are more expensive in the private sector. While the two- or three-minute commute between home, the office and the university may help things, to accommodate running a successful practice and also being a full-time professor, Hennie plans on refocusing the firm on the more profitable A and B clients, while eliminating the lower tier ones.

And so, although there may be another bend in the road that Hennie and Margaret have shared for 30 years, wherever that road may lead, they will be together.

And odds are that they'll be successful, whether it's public accounting,

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