

Staying course in tough times exemplifies SBOYA finalists

BY CARLENE COBB

Several women-owned businesses were chosen as finalists in the category of five to 20 employees.

The finalists are:

■ AVANTGOLD JEWELERS

Tampa

Jeffrey Abeles, co-owner, said their greatest achievement this year was "the honor of being a finalist for the Tampa Chamber's Small Business of the Year Award."

After 23 years, AvantGold remains a fixture in Carrollwood.

Eleven employees include a gemologist and watch repair specialist.

Suane Abeles, designer and co-owner, has developed a reputation as a trusted name in custom design work.

Their second store opened and closed in South Tampa in the mid-1980s. From that challenge the Abeles learned to focus on their existing store, expanding designers and adding new merchandise.

"In 2001, individual unit sales were up 20 percent," said Jeffrey Abeles. "We are here long term, providing top quality and service."

■ COLLEGIATE RISK MANAGEMENT INC.

Tarpon Springs

Vonda K White, president, described 2001 as "a tough year for our industry.

"After Sept. 11, insurance companies had increases," White said. "Some of our largest accounts went shopping for more competitive bids."

Collegiate Risk Management's 10 employees called forth their "drive to sell."

White founded the national insurance brokerage firm, which specializes in health insurance for college and university students, in 1996.

"Each year we've grown," said White.

This year has been no exception, and White expects revenue to double in the next five years.

"We know we can overcome any obstacle," White said.

■ NEW MILLENNIAL HOMES

Tampa

New Millennial received the PaceSetters Award from The Business Journal Serving Greater Tampa Bay and the accounting firm Grant Thornton LLP last year, recognizing the homebuilder's tremendous growth.

"There's a very strong demand among first-time home buyers, and that

has contributed to our 50-percent growth rate in the last two years," said Michael Shrenk, president.

New Millennial set goals to build superior homes at a fair price. Shrenk chose to build "lot by lot" and developed a management system for multiple sites.

"We just added staff, now totaling 23," Shrenk said. "Our revenue increased 50 percent last year. We're on track for another 50 percent next year."

■ THE LEGAL REGISTRY STAFFING SERVICES INC.

Clearwater

Bobbie G. Wheeler saw a niche and seized the chance to build on it.

The president of the firm that specializes in placing legal support staff started the business in 1994 with one other employee working from Wheeler's home.

"Growth management is our greatest challenge," Wheeler said. "Adding six employees this year brings the staff to 12. With branches in Tampa, Clearwater, St. Pete and Milwaukee, more formalized management systems were required."

Wheeler said the company's greatest achievement this year was creating AdImagery, a spin-off marketing company for outside staffing services.

"We expect revenues for this year to hold steady, improving after that," she said.

■ TOMLIN STAFFING

Tampa

Holly Tomlin, president, founded the company in 1985 and is proud of increasing its client base 24 percent last year.

"I am involved with the generation of new business," she said. "It's fun for me, and it's critical because there are more qualified applicants than available positions."

Competing with national firms is Tomlin's greatest challenge, met by focusing on quality and service in communities served. Tomlin describes her full-service employment agency as a "boutique agency, emphasizing personalized service."

Revenue did not grow but remained stable last year. Expenses were held in balance, retaining five employees.

"We saw this slow economy coming," Tomlin said.