



Staff photo by Kevin Hamack

Fienna Zvenyach is president of IBC Engineering Services Inc.

## ON THE LEVEL | FIEENA ZVENYACH

# Finding freedom

## Engineering firm founder inspired by immigration

**Jessica Stephen**

Special to The Daily Reporter

Fienna Zvenyach knew starting a business would be a struggle.

But, she has often reminded herself, it was nothing compared to what her parents faced in June 1980, when they fled the former Soviet Union with their two daughters, Zvenyach and her sister, as political refugees.

“It’s hard to move from house to house, job to job, state to state,” said Zvenyach, president, founder and co-owner of IBC Engineering Services Inc., Waukesha. “To move everybody across the world without knowing the language, the customs, no money, having very limited family. Every time I think about it, I’m awestruck.”

Her family’s immigration to the United States gave her the freedom to eventually pursue her goal of opening a business, Zvenyach said, and her parents’ example gave her the courage to believe she could.

“I think being able to take risks was something that became almost natural, seeing how my folks did it,” she said. “And, frankly, when you start your business, you don’t really realize everything it may entail. Some of that naiveté is a good thing because if you really would know everything that it would take, I don’t think as many people would dare.”

Zvenyach founded the company in 1990. At the start she was moonlighting as a business consultant serving primarily Russian clients.

Her engineer husband, and now co-owner, Lev, joined a year later, after his division of GE Medical Systems Inc. closed. For a while, the husband-and-wife team ran the company side by side, each sharing responsibility for all aspects of the business, including engineering.

That changed in 1995, when Zvenyach, an engineer by education but a project manager by experience, withdrew from the increasingly dangerous Soviet sector to pursue work closer to home.

Her husband took over the engineering work, and Zvenyach handled everything else: financials, business development, risk management, “whatever it takes to run an organization.”

“That’s when we started to grow,” she said.

Today, the engineering firm has 27 employees and clients from as far away as Kuala Lumpur. The best part, Zvenyach said, is having the freedom to pursue work that aligns with her values, and reject work that does not.

“Buildings we work on, the systems we design, we try to design to the best of our abilities and make them as energy efficient as possible,” she said. “So I feel that, one small system at a time, we fight global warming. ... We are committed to the concept of sustainability, and that goes not only for energy but also for environment. Most of us are tree huggers.”

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**The Daily Reporter:** When you have a bad day, what keeps you coming back to work?

**Fienna Zvenyach:** First, my team, the group of people I work with because they are an extended family. And believing in the importance of what we do.

**TDR:** What would you change about the construction industry?

**Zvenyach:** I guess a more collaborative approach, a more integrated approach with the stakeholders. Less conflict, more collaboration.

**TDR:** What is the most useful thing you’ve learned since starting your job?

**Zvenyach:** [Laughs] Anything I learn, as soon as I think I know it, I realize I don’t. So, I would say continued learning is something that should be embraced.

**TDR:** What do you wish you’d learned sooner?

**Zvenyach:** [Laughs] When I was in grad school, I was focusing on things that I thought would be relevant for me as a project manager and kind of ignored things that I ended up doing every day. I wish I spent more time learning HR and accounting. It’s

those things that you sit through classes and you think, ‘Yes, I understand. But why would I ever do that?’ God has a very funny sense of humor.

**TDR:** What object in your office means the most to you?

**Zvenyach:** From a purely sentimental point of view, I have a poster that my son gave me. It’s become very common recently, but the poster says, ‘Keep Calm and Carry On.’ [It was] part of British war propaganda, and there’s actually a little bit of story there. The person who actually publicized this particular poster never intended to publicize it, but he liked it because it was not used actually during the war. So, he hung it in his office. And so many people wanted a reprint of it, he ended up getting the rights to reprint it.

The poster I have is one of the original reprints. My son, when he saw it, he immediately thought of the play on the British stiff upper lip, but also that I tend to get excited very easily and have to remind myself to stay calm. So, he got me that poster, and it’s been hanging in my office for almost 10 years. I was way ahead of the trend. And I’ve even gotten a few variations since then, like ‘Keep Calm and Buy Shoes.’