



Davis:
Disaster failed
to dampen
her fire.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS WADE

FIGHT WITHOUT FEAR

The fire raged, consuming the downtown Des Moines building. Dixie Davis watched from the 7th Street Bridge, gripping the arms of her wheelchair and expecting the worst.

Her business, Accent Tag & Label Inc., was across the street from the burning building. In an attempt to keep the hungry flames at bay, firefighters would periodically hose down Accent's facade. The crowd on the bridge was soon ordered to

leave: The building on fire housed 100 drums of highly explosive material. "If those go," the fire chief told the onlookers, "It'll take a city block in every direction."

Davis struggles to keep her voice steady as she recounts that day, but it's no use. "I just watched that fire, thinking about how hard I'd worked to get where I was," she chokes. "I just sat there and thought: 'It's gone.'"

But the firefighters finally extinguished the blaze, with only minimal water damage to Accent Tag & Label. Davis felt like she'd been granted a miracle — but

it was more like a harbinger of doom.

Accent Tag & Label was six years old. Davis, sick of the lack of control she had over service quality when she was sales manager for another label company, started the business with just a press operator (her partner at the time) and a receptionist. Although it meant 20-hour workdays for a while, the firm grew. By 1993 Davis had 20 employees and \$2 million in revenue.

That spring the forces of nature slammed Davis with a vengeance. First she underwent hip-replacement surgery — her second —

Davis went into high gear when the flood hit.

which left her "incarcerated in a wheelchair." Then in May came the fire. Perhaps Davis shouldn't have been so surprised when the flood hit two months later.

She and her husband, Joe, were heading back to town after a day trip. Driving by the business, they saw water gushing out of the manholes in the street. The Davises hurried home, where Dixie sat frustrated in her wheelchair as Joe ran back to Accent Tag & Label. Joe, the two other principals, and several employees worked until 2:30 a.m. moving the graphics and plate making equipment up to the second level. They tried to salvage as much paper and tooling as possible, but they ran out of room. Joe brought Dixie to the plant at 6 a.m., when everyone started sandbagging.

"I sat in my wheelchair out front giving as much moral support as I could," Dixie says. "But the water was coming up fast." Joe was forced to move her to the top of the 7th Street Bridge — putting her smack in the middle of a creepy *déjà vu*. "I just sat there helplessly, watching my life's blood slip away. Again."

After two days, the water level had reached six feet in the plant. Most of the inventory, dies, and tooling were ruined. "We had to get a FEMA loan to replace them," says Davis. "Everything had been paid for in full, to the tune of \$210,000." The clean up alone cost between \$100,000 and \$175,000, Davis estimates. "It was a big blow," she says.

Ironically, Davis's near-catastrophic experience with the fire helped save her business after the flood. Immediately after the fire, she and the other principals in the company "closeted ourselves away for days, going through everything we needed to think about if another disaster were to happen," Davis says.

When the flood hit, Davis switched into high gear. She rented press time at a label company in St. Louis and sent two opera-

tors there. She had the plant's six phone lines transferred to her home number. She struck deals with suppliers to get more time to pay bills.

The flood cleanup took three months, Davis says. "But we did not miss one ship date. In fact, we received more business and new clients."

This year, Davis — who's walking again, "better than I ever could" — expects to reach \$5 million in sales. "Things are excellent right now," she says, as she describes her company's new headquarters. "It's *nowhere* near the river!" she laughs.



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