

Murrysville woman among state's 50 best in business

By Marilyn Bartolacci

The numbers have been adding up in IQ Inc. owner Barbara VanKirk's life. She is number six of 13 children, the fourth daughter, and most recently, one of Pennsylvania's Best 50 Women in Business for 2003. She is the only woman from Westmoreland County to be selected by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

VanKirk, 47, was honored at an awards reception at the Hershey Lodge and Convention Center last month. The award program acknowledges and celebrates the many women business leaders and business owners who have helped the state create jobs and achieve economic goals. Candidates must be female residents, or employed in the state, and be an owner, partner, president, chief executive officer, board chair, senior executive management level or a woman with significant authority for decision making.

"I usually keep a low profile — this was quite a shock to me," VanKirk, of Murrysville, said.

VanKirk was nominated by two of her employees, Kenneth Price and Paul Lusardi, who cited her for "dedicating herself and her staff to continually exploring new ways of improving both professional and personal growth. Each year each employee is given several thousand dollars for the professional growth necessary to stay competitive in an ever-changing work environment.

VanKirk is a 1983 graduate of Thomas Jefferson High School in Pleasant Hills. Her school counselor, who knew VanKirk's family couldn't afford to send her to college, suggested she attend career day at school. Westinghouse Electric Corp. was going to be there, and VanKirk had an interest in science and math. But Westinghouse was hiring women only as secretaries or office assistants. She persuaded them to give her an aptitude test. They hired her on the spot as a technical assistant.

It took VanKirk nine years attending night school to earn her bachelor's degree in computerscience from Point Park College. During that time, she was laid off and re-hired at Westinghouse's nuclear energy division in Monroeville.

VanKirk left Westinghouse in 1988 and worked in computer consulting and sales. By 1994, she had two small children, and decided she wanted more flexibility in her work. The result was IQ Inc., an "intelligent personnel service."

Starting in her own home, she hired her first employee, Lee Ann Caliendo, as a part-time recruiter in 1996 (Caliendo is still with the company). Today the company has grown to 29 workers. IQ Inc. employees help client companies with projects such as installing or upgrading computer systems.

Located at 4530 William Penn Highway since 2001, VanKirk's is one of many small businesses in Murrysville that have chosen to move into a house in the transition

zone rather than an office building. Some 95 percent of her employees are telecommuters, working from their homes and on site with clients.

"We're very successful in consulting. Now we want to work on our project and product development. Our goal is 50 employees," VanKirk said.

"I don't have a business degree, so I learned by trial and error. I took all the good things I had learned at Westinghouse and the two small companies I had worked for and combined them into my business plan. We have a young staff, ranging in age from 30 to 40 years old, with lots of young children. It's really important to me to provide health care benefits, 401Ks, paid vacations and holidays," VanKirk said. She even wrote a substantial employee handbook to back it up.

Van Kirk made sure that all of her staff took advantage of online training through Westmoreland County Community College funded by a state grant for small companies.

VanKirk is a member of Pittsburgh Technology Council, the Westmoreland Chamber of Commerce and the Murrysville Business Development Committee. She and her husband, John, whom she met at Westinghouse, have two children, Scott, a freshman at Virginia Tech, and Bethany, a student at Franklin Regional.

Marilyn Bartolacci is a freelance writer.