

# Suburban Life

Lorraine McClellan editor / 477-5450



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## Professional polish

### Career housecleaners enjoy entrepreneurial status

By Marie McGee  
staff writer

**M**OST WOMEN go back to work to get away from housework.

Not so for Mary Smith, Linda Glance and Marilyn Ries. Collectively, but separately they went back to work to clean houses.

Smith, of Farmington, for the past 12 years has owned her own housecleaning company, Domestic Services at 32401 Eight Mile Road in Livonia.

Glance and Ries, both of Westland, have just started their own firm. They call it Partners in Grime and at the present time they operate from Glance's home.

All three are aware — as is just about every working woman anywhere — that housecleaning is big business.

In fact, in the last decade, the housecleaning business has been literally cleaning up.

ALL THREE women also are part of a growing number of self-employed female entrepreneurs, the number of which has risen approximately 50 percent in the last 10 years. This is five times the rate of increase for men.

Recent government estimates also show that four out of every five new businesses started throughout the United States are owned by women. The figures show that for every five women entering the work force, three do so by starting their own business.

Statistics like those build feminine pride — but the one that has had more impact on Smith, Glance and Ries is the fact that the majority of the nation's work force is now female — 53.7 percent, according to government figures. And that figure is expected to escalate to more than 60 percent by 1990.

THAT COULD MAKE housecleaning a pretty lucrative business.

Smith made that determination 12 years quite by accident.

Her husband, a Ford Motor Co. engineer, went into partnership in a janitorial firm with another Ford Motor colleague.

In the beginning Mary Smith's involvement was minimal in the business that specialized in office cleaning. But as the business grew, she assumed more and more responsibility. Eventually, the partnership split with her husband's partner concentrating on Detroit and her husband focusing on Livonia and surrounding areas.

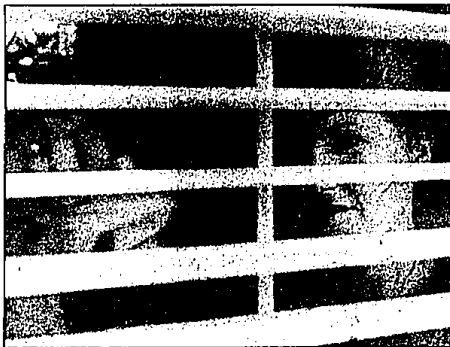
At this point, Smith recalls, she took over the local operations because her husband was too busy with his engineering job to run the firm.

Mary Smith made an important change right off. She got out of the office cleaning business and began concentrating on homes in Livonia and Farmington.

THE MOVE HAS paid off. The firm has prospered to the point where it now services the tri-county area of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb with a staff of 40-45 women who work part time.

They are bonded and fully insured, Smith said.

Many of the women advertising in the newspapers for housecleaning are not bonded or insured, Smith noted.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Mini-blinds get the maximum treatment from Linda Glance.

They are part of a vast "underground" work force doing business but not paying taxes because they are not registered as companies.

"Usually these women do not even declare their wages on their income tax returns," Smith said.

"They work cheaper because they are being paid 'under the table,' so to speak," added Smith. They are also the biggest source of competition.

But her years of experience have shown, she added, that most people prefer to have someone in their home who is bonded and insured.

"Professional people like to hire professional people," she said.

"PARTNERS IN Grime" employees are also bonded and insured.

The fledgling firm at present has only a staff of four — including Glance and Ries.

Their method of operation is slightly different than that of Smith's firm.

The four women work as a team. "Where most cleaning firms send one person for four or five hours," Glance said, "we go in and clean the house in one hour or more, depending on what the customer wants. That way the home is disrupted for a shorter period."

Married with families, both Glance and Ries are neighbors and independently were cleaning houses as a way of picking up extra money.

"ONE DAY WE were talking over the kitchen table and decided to pool our efforts and go into business," Ries said.

That they were on the right track was evidenced by the fact that after just two newspaper ads, they got 30 clients.

For Glance, who grew up in Redford, housecleaning is a far cry from the career she had before marriage and the birth of her daughter. She has art degrees from Wayne State University and Madonna College.

Before her daughter was born eight years ago, she was merchandise display supervisor for J. C. Penney and

was the first woman to work in that capacity in the opening of a Penney store. That store happened to be the Westland outlet.

Ries of Dearborn Heights is a certified cosmetology instructor and also has clerical skills. Bookkeeping is one of them so she was a natural to handle the company books.

Smith's right-hand is Livonia resident Roslyn Grocoff who acts as office manager.

Both firms stress customer satisfaction and have various ways of checking to see if clients are happy with the cleaning job. An open line of communication is most important — even if it's only a note on the refrigerator door.

SMITH GOES so far as to guarantee 100 percent satisfaction or the job will be redone.

Customers of both firms are asked to specify the cleaning products they want used and also must furnish them.

In the beginning, Smith said she furnished all the cleaning supplies, but soon switched to having the client supply them because of a divergent views of what works best.

"As a result, I have a basement full of exotic cleaning supplies," she chuckled.

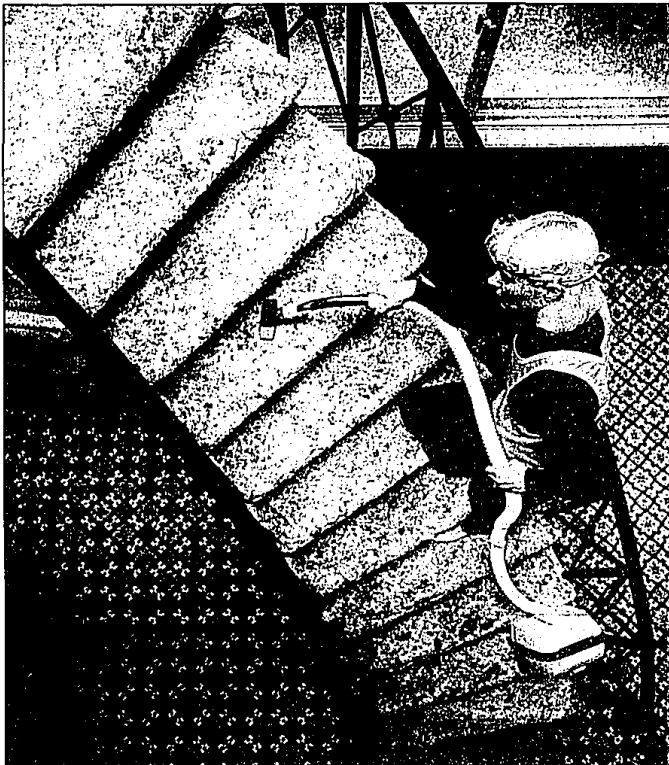
Rates in the industry, for licensed companies, are generally about \$10 per hour per person. Smith gives customers a price break depending on how often the service is used in a month's time.

In a decade of owning the firm, Smith has seen a lot of changes.

One of them, she noted, is the cleaning lady herself.

"We're all used to the stereotype of the cleaning woman — short, rather chubby, about 40ish, wearing an apron and her hair tucked back in a kerchief. A little like the character comedienne Carol Burnett used to play on her Saturday night TV show. Well, that's all changed," she said.

CHANCES ARE NOW the cleaning lady will be younger and usually quite



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Marilyn Ries goes up the down staircase with a vacuum.

attractive in appearance and dress. Many are college students. Smith likes them because they are "bright and energetic."

But her mainstay is the young homemaker in need of earning some extra money without tying herself down to a 9-5 job.

Sadly, however, many of the young women she hires are displaced homemakers — either through divorce, death or having the husband leave and she is forced to support a family, Smith said.

"Some of them come in and it's obvious that they are battered women," Smith said. "Not only from their appearance but from the fact that their self-confidence is low. They feel the only thing they can do is keep house."

SMITH SAID SHE and Grocoff give these women special attention.

"We try to get them into counseling. One of our best sources has been the Women's Resource Center at Schoolcraft College," Smith added.

All of Domestic's employees get VIP (very important person treatment) at birthday time. "We send them cards and often they get flowers on special occasions," Smith said.

Over the years, Smith said women have become less fussy in their demands from housecleaners.

"Early on, the woman of the house was at home when the cleaning woman came and she wanted you to do her hand laundry," said Smith.

Now, the woman of the house is rarely home.

BOTH COMPANIES have keys to most of their clients' homes. Another reason, Smith said, people want the cleaners to be bonded.

Clients also like the idea of having their own individual cleaning lady, Smith has observed.

Surprisingly, a lot of service orders come from husbands, Smith said.

"They just hate to scrub kitchen floors. That's one way to get a cleaning lady. Get your husband to scrub the kitchen floor three weeks in a row. He'll be on the phone quicker than you can shake a dust mop."

Domestic Services can be reached at 477-5307. Partners in Grime can be reached at 425-4445.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Melissa Slavic of Westland wipes off a chandelier as part of a Partners in Grime's four-man team. A timer is used to limit the time spent on any one job.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Turnover is a big problem in the housecleaning field Rosalyn Grocoff (left) of Livonia and Mary

Smith of Farmington have found in the operation of Domestic Services over the past decade.