



SUM STORYTELLING SERIES: DETROIT

Diseños Ornamental Iron

“ **It’s something we’ve been thinking about and talking about for years ... Now to see the upstairs being remodeled is kind of like, ‘Yes, I’m doing it.’** ”

When Nieves Longordo’s step-dad Tony Martinez and his brothers came to Detroit from Colombia in the 1970s, one of the siblings noticed a dearth of the kind of custom metal fabrication shops he’d worked in back home. So they rented a little unheated garage in South Detroit with money from their jobs at a meat processing factory to start Diseños Ornamental Iron.

His brothers eventually moved on, but Martinez developed Diseños into a regional name. The company thrived by fabricating elegant gates, staircases, and balconies for real estate contracts across Detroit and as far west as Chicago.

Then the recession hit, and with it business slumped. The company downsized. In the late 2000s Martinez decided he’d soon retire.

Longordo, who started working in the office around the same time, wondered what that meant for Diseños. “I just

couldn't imagine the business going to someone who was not family," she said.

With Martinez' departure on the horizon Longordo stepped up to the plate and became president in 2009. Learning how to run a business was pure trial-by-fire. She says both clients and Diseños' predominantly male workforce raised their eyebrows at a woman president.

"When I'd go to sales appointments people would go like, 'Wait, you're a woman and you're really young, what the heck, what do you know?'" says Longordo. She says rumors circulated through the grapevine that some clients had lost faith in the company.

But with help from business support organizations and the savvy that comes from watching experienced employees on the shop floor, "every year it gets better," she says.

"If I could tell you how many times it was just hard tears and blood literally, from the struggles and lessons I had to learn the hard way," she says. "Year by year my confidence level grows, and I've learned to seek help."

Organizations like SCORE and the Small Business Association of Michigan provided her technical advice on how to manage and market a business. Last

December, she graduated from the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program with a vision on how the company can tap into the interior design market.

Today Diseños is a lean but buoyant operation with 14 employees that make between \$13 to \$23 an hour. They do all their design, fabrication, powder coating, and insulation in-house.

But like many other Detroit manufacturers, Diseños is still looking to fill workforce gaps. Most manufacturers that participated in the Urban Manufacturing Alliance's [*State of Urban Manufacturing: Detroit City Snapshot*](#) surveys said a lack of qualified personnel was one of their three most significant barriers to



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growth. In Longordo's case, the qualified employee she is after is a foreman who can administer the production line while she administers the entire company.

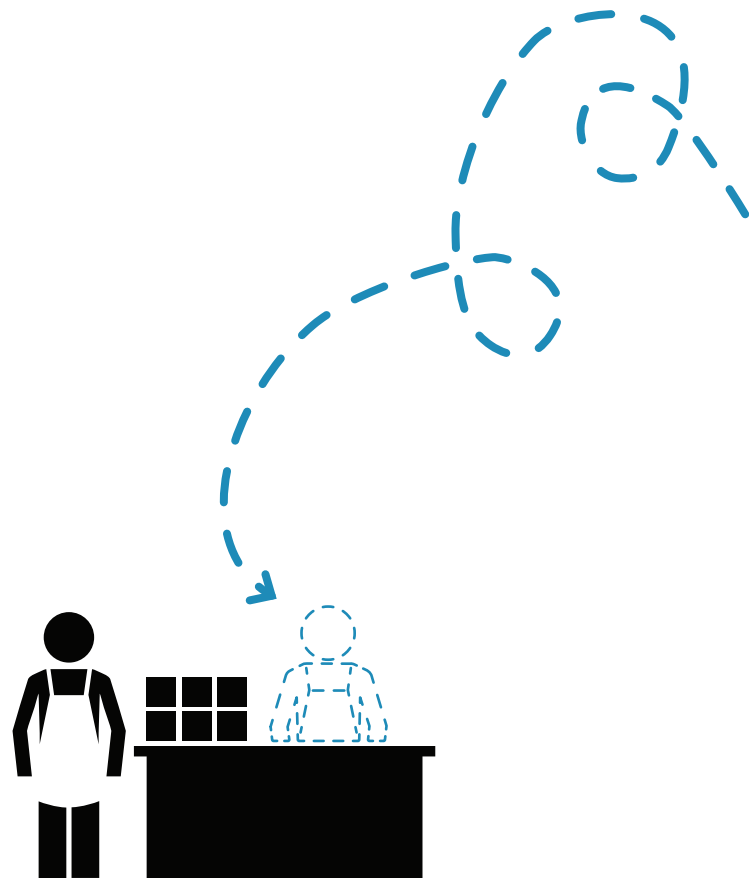
Leadership shortage aside, she's moving forward with Diseños' next big phase, which will bring the Southwest Detroit community to her building on a regular basis. Longordo has some extra storage space in her facility's second floor that she's turning into a gallery for local artisans and artists from the area.

The idea is to invite her clients and businesses from the neighborhood to the occasional show where they can get to know local producers. That gives local producers a chance to sell to new customers.

Longordo says they'll also use the second-floor space to debut Diseños' newest concepts. It's part of her push to create a community around local fabrication while diversifying revenue streams in her building as Southwest Detroit's prices continue to rise.

"It's something we've been thinking about and talking about for years but we've kind of just held ourselves back," said Longordo. "Now to see the upstairs being remodeled is kind of like, 'Yes, I'm doing it.'"

Visit dironwork.com to see the latest designs from Longordo's team.





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