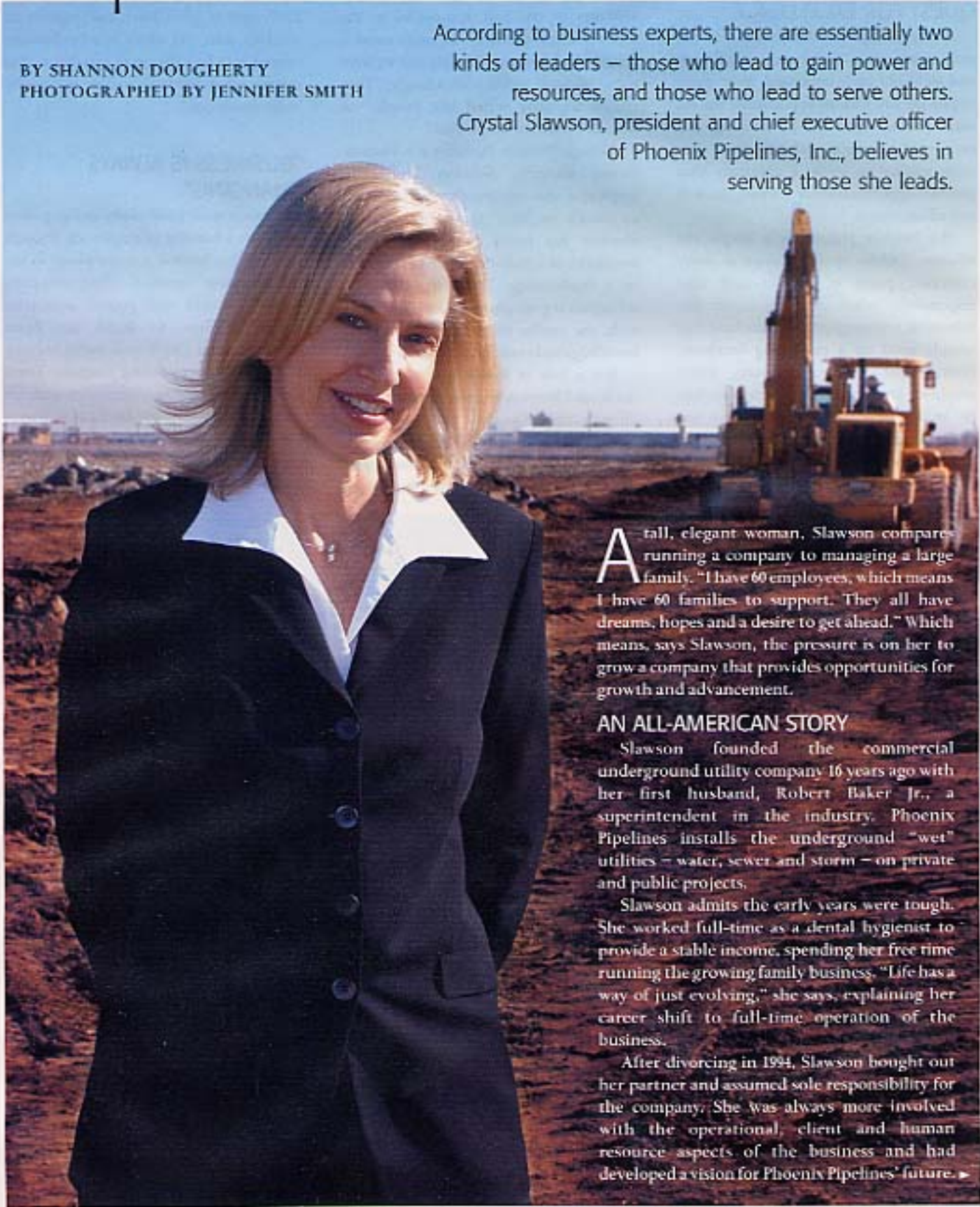


# A Pipeline to Success

BY SHANNON DOUGHERTY  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JENNIFER SMITH

According to business experts, there are essentially two kinds of leaders – those who lead to gain power and resources, and those who lead to serve others. Crystal Slawson, president and chief executive officer of Phoenix Pipelines, Inc., believes in serving those she leads.



A tall, elegant woman, Slawson compares running a company to managing a large family. "I have 60 employees, which means I have 60 families to support. They all have dreams, hopes and a desire to get ahead." Which means, says Slawson, the pressure is on her to grow a company that provides opportunities for growth and advancement.

## AN ALL-AMERICAN STORY

Slawson founded the commercial underground utility company 16 years ago with her first husband, Robert Baker Jr., a superintendent in the industry. Phoenix Pipelines installs the underground "wet" utilities – water, sewer and storm – on private and public projects.

Slawson admits the early years were tough. She worked full-time as a dental hygienist to provide a stable income, spending her free time running the growing family business. "Life has a way of just evolving," she says, explaining her career shift to full-time operation of the business.

After divorcing in 1994, Slawson bought out her partner and assumed sole responsibility for the company. She was always more involved with the operational, client and human resource aspects of the business and had developed a vision for Phoenix Pipelines' future. ▶

"I'm never happy with the status quo," says Slawson. "I always want to improve on all aspects of the business."

## QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

Slawson's high standards extend to her employees as well. "I inform new employees that we're not easily impressed. We're going to provide you with an opportunity and see what you do with it." In exchange for excellence, Slawson believes it is her responsibility to grow a company that provides opportunities for learning, growth and advancement.

Her business philosophy is simple but effective: Deliver quality service at every customer point of contact and take responsibility when problems occur. She believes in real integrity — not the kind that sounds good on a marketing brochure. From labor to management, every employee knows that if a problem occurs, he or she only needs to determine one thing: What's the right thing to do?

"Once we know that," says Slawson, "that is what we're going to do." Regardless

of the financial costs, Slawson is committed to standing behind the work of her company.

Phoenix Pipelines took safety seriously long before it was fashionable to do so. It was one of the first companies in the subcontractor industry to implement a drug-testing program. "People said we were nuts," Slawson recalls with a laugh. "They said if we drug tested our people, we wouldn't have any employees."

Though Phoenix Pipelines is a woman-owned business, Slawson prefers to emphasize the company's reputation for excellence in their marketing strategy. Slawson has never found her female presidency in a male-dominated industry to be a disadvantage. Describing her male colleagues as great guys who are fun to work with, she credits them with building her knowledge and confidence over the years.

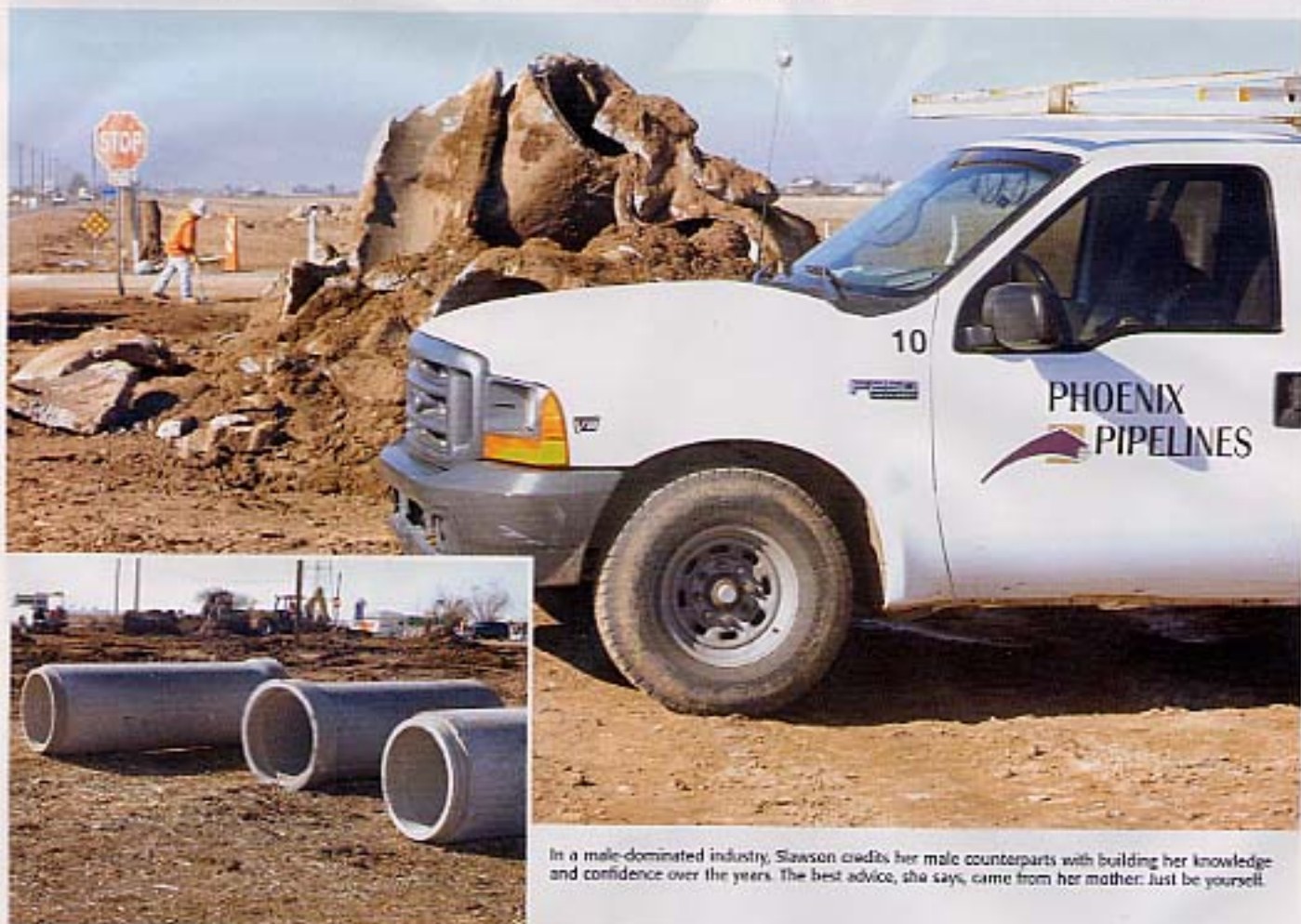
But a lack of female role models has challenged Slawson to carve her own niche. Though other women in construction management have modeled themselves after men, she chose a different road based on good advice from her mom. "She told me

to be myself. That I could still be a lady in a man's world. That advice rang true for me."

Slawson loves her work, citing people and the business game as the most enjoyable aspects. She finds herself constantly challenged to grow, learn and improve on what she does. Her advice to other business owners is to be a person of excellence. "No matter what industry you're in, quality really stands out."

## "BUSINESS IS ALWAYS CHANGING"

Once a traditional mom-and-pop shop with just a handful of employees, Phoenix Pipelines has become a major player in the subcontractor market. The company recently worked with general contractor Barton Mallow to build the Texas Rangers/Kansas City Royals spring training facility and surrounding Surprise Town Center. These lengthy, complex projects are good for the company because managers gain experience in coordinating several crews on one site, giving them the confidence to handle larger sites. ▶



In a male-dominated industry, Slawson credits her male counterparts with building her knowledge and confidence over the years. The best advice, she says, came from her mother: Just be yourself.

But the road hasn't always been smooth, concedes Slawson. September 11 and its subsequent effect on the economy was a major challenge for the construction industry. Owners and developers refused to release projects for bid, instead adopting a wait-and-see approach.

Since the economy is always a vulnerable area in her industry, Slawson learned long ago to diversify. She's cultivated strong relationships with general contractors in a variety of markets, including commercial, private, public work, schools and churches. Phoenix Pipelines successfully weathered the financial storm and is now adding employees and equipment to the business.

Establishing the company's structure, systems, processes and accountabilities, and establishing education and safety programs for employees are just a few of the ongoing challenges that come with a growing business. "Business is always changing," says Slawson. "To me, it has a life of its own that constantly needs to be fed."

Slawson spends much of her workday with managers, resolving issues that crop up in the field, estimating and accounting divisions of her company. Networking is important because she likes to cultivate relationships with contractors and developers while projects are still in the planning stage.

It was through her construction business that Slawson met second husband, Rand Slawson, also a business owner in the construction industry. The couple lives in Paradise Valley with their two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. He is an accomplished private pilot, and they both enjoy riding their Arabian horses.

One of the best tests of leadership is to look at the lives of those who are being led. Do they grow as employees and people? Are they healthier, wiser, more likely to become leaders themselves? At Phoenix Pipelines, with Crystal Slawson at the helm, the answer is unequivocally yes. Many of its managers and foremen started in the industry as laborers, a fact Slawson in which takes great pride. "I love that. It's my responsibility to grow this company for the sake of all of those involved with its success." +



Crystal Slawson is a member of the **ENR** *WOMEN* Top 100 sponsored by:

