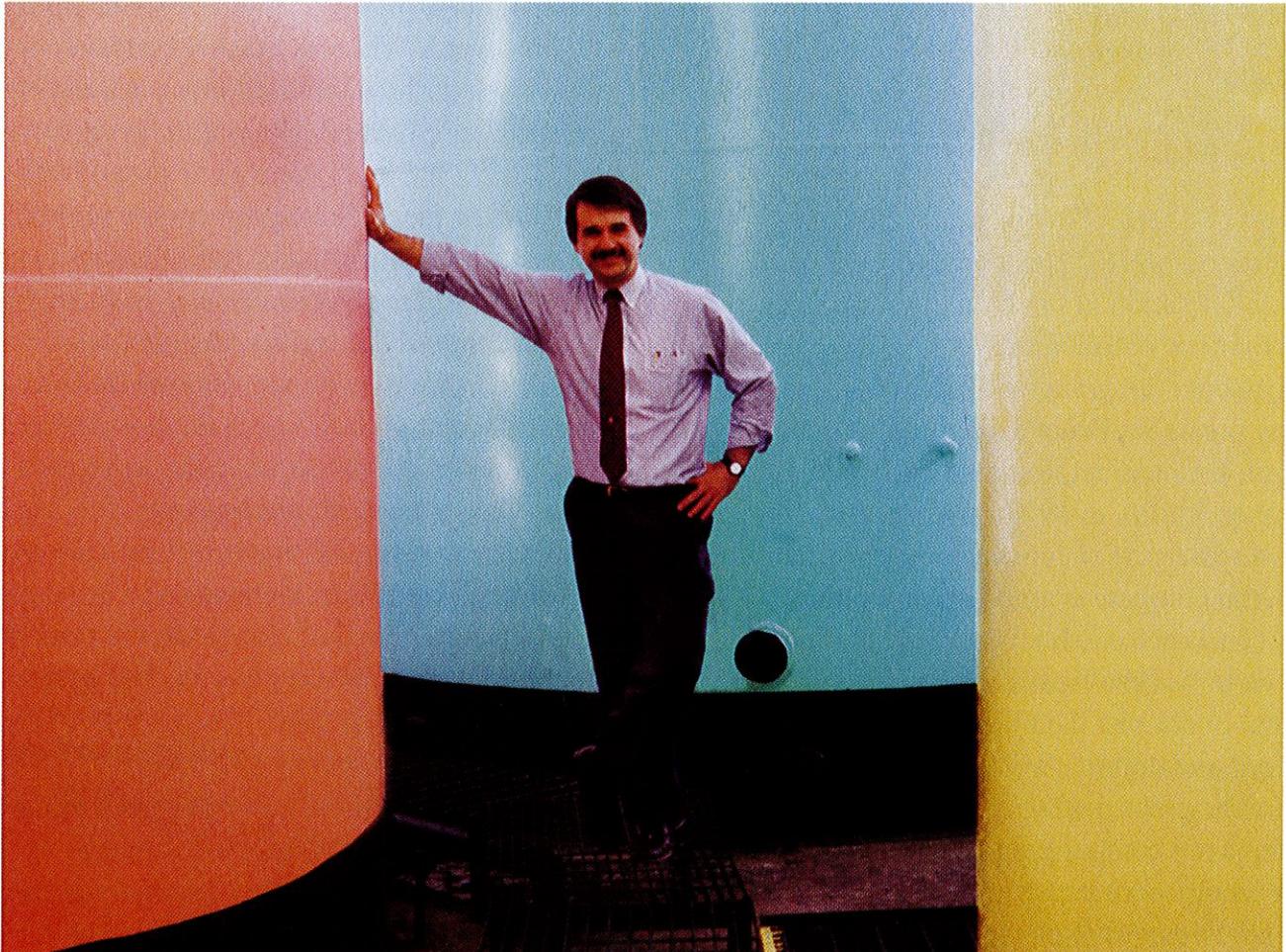


ALLSTON-BRIGHTON TAB

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Houghton Chemical president Bruce Houghton standing under the Allston company's chemical tanks. The company won the Boston Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year Award.

Perfect Chemistry

By David McLaughlin

Staff Writer

Houghton Chemical Corp. is a company that tries to stand out. Crammed between the Mass. Pike and Charles River, the Allston company paints its chemical tanks a rainbow of pastels, creating a place where models have come to pose. And the whole operation is run by a guy who once wanted to be an oceanographer.

"I go against the grain — all the time," said company president Bruce Houghton.

Houghton Chemical, founded by Bruce's grandfather, Philip, in 1927 in Worcester, distributes a variety of chemicals to pharmaceutical and film companies among many others. Philip's son Proctor, who moved the company to Allston in the 1960s, still works in a corner office that overlooks the train yard. And with its orange rug and curtains and the all-glass meeting table, the place probably hasn't changed much since the company first moved in.

The eccentricities are everywhere. But Proctor and his two sons (Mark, who is a Zen master in Cambridge, also works at the company) apparently know what they are doing. Although they keep sales figures to themselves, they have bought six companies in the past 10 years, according to Bruce, and at the end of September, Houghton Chemical was awarded the Boston Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year award. According to a release from the chamber, the company won because of its service and quality standards.

But Bruce says that without Houghton's

unique culture, the company would not have won the award. Whereas most chemical companies try to hide within the towns and cities where they are located, Houghton, he says, tries to stay visible. He sees their pastel tanks as artwork, a place photographers are invited to take pictures of. In a binder full of letters from people sent to the company, many from students who have toured the facility, the one Bruce points out is from a woman who would take the Mass. Pike exit on her way to the hospital to see a family member. The sight of the tanks, she wrote, always made her feel calm.

"When you come off that ramp, this is just a blow-away," he said of the tanks.

Employees agree that Houghton is somehow different. Dianne Flaherty has worked as a secretary there a year. Before taking the job, she spent 15 years at a management company. Flaherty, who lives in Allston, sees Proctor Houghton at neighborhood meetings and says employees at the company will take on different jobs regardless of whether the tasks are in their job description.

"Nobody thinks anything is beneath them here," she said.

Switchboard operator Kerin Kelley will mark her 15th year at Houghton in December. She says the family makes the business what it is

"He has a stake in the community. He wants to better the community in which he is located."

Bill Margolin

— “casual people-wise,” but a formal business at the same time.

“I compare them to my brothers,” she said of the Houghtons, “You can joke around with them very easily. It’s a fun place.”

“I would say we have an empowered staff, and we emphasize that and try to develop it,” said Mark Houghton, vice president and general manager of industrial chemicals, who lived in a Zen center for 15 years.

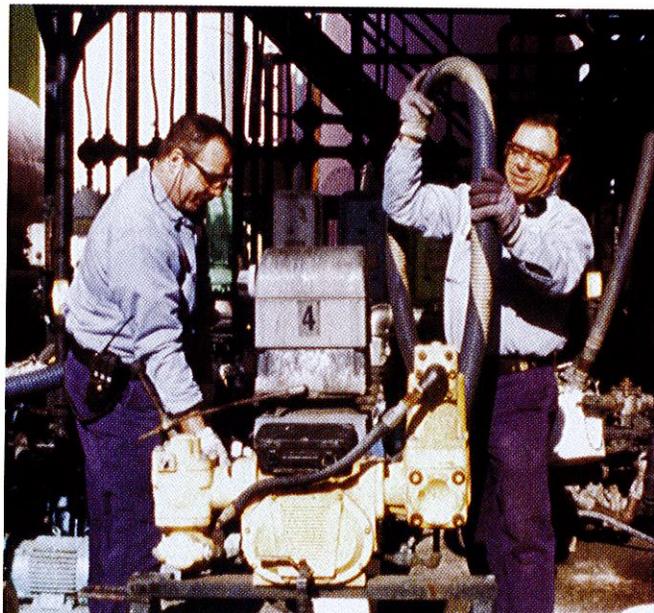
While Bruce and Mark spend their time in Cambridge (Bruce is a girls soccer coach there), Proctor focuses on Allston, especially the West End House Boys and Girls Club on Allston Street, where he has donated time and money. Bill Margolin, executive director of the West End Camp, has come to know Proctor through serving with him on the Allston Board of Trade. Proctor, he said, has become really involved in the West End House in the last 10 years or so and not only donates money, but more importantly, his time. Proctor was even asked to serve on the club’s board of directors.

“He has a stake in the community,” says Margolin. “He wants to better the community in which he is located.”

Proctor and his sons have created their own vision for the company. And since those early days in Worcester, it has changed significantly. About half of the chemicals Philip Houghton distributed back then, like shellac, are now obsolete, says Proctor.

Today, Houghton Chemical distributes a variety of products, about 100 total, including water treatment chemicals and heat-transfer fluids. It provides chemicals to pharmaceutical, high-tech and film companies. It has 17 stocking sights around the country and a second corporate sight in New Jersey. But the company doesn’t make the chemicals for customers. It just distributes. “It’s like Home Depot is to wood,” said Bruce.

But Houghton isn’t just about pushing prod-



Paul Lazazzero, right, and Steve Culwell working at Houghton Chemical.

ucts, says Mark. “Business isn’t about selling products. Business is about working with people,” he said.

Both he and Bruce know the general public sees the company’s chemicals – with names like diethylene glycol – as hazardous. But they try to spread the message that they can also have a tremendous benefit. Houghton distributes chemicals that are used in the making of Aspirin and AZT, for example. Their products are used in rugs, tiles, light bulbs, photographic processing – everywhere, says Mark.

“It’s how we use it and how we as a society use it,” said Bruce.

Proctor echoes a similar sentiment when asked if he is passionate about chemicals: “I’m not passionate about chemicals now. I am passionate about the needs of society, which involve chemicals.”



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