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## Entrepreneurs

Profiles of 2011 Excellence in  
Entrepreneurship award winners

# Sheet Metal Executive Overcomes Family Death, Housing Downturn

**MANUFACTURING:** Kurtz diversifies into solar, other areas

■ By Chris Casacchia

**Mari Kurtz** is a survivor.

As a kid growing up in Palm Desert, she overcame dyslexia and a stutter.

In ninth grade, she quit school to work and support her family.

One job was at a fast food joint, the other at the local newspaper handling advertising inserts.

She then waited tables, moving from job to job until she met her first husband, owner of a sheet metal company. She was 20 and it seemed her life was taking a turn for the better.

Then, in 1998, her husband killed himself, leaving the stay-at-home mother of two in charge of the business, family and personal finances.

"My professional career began the day my husband passed away," said Kurtz, chief executive of Santa Ana-based **Cal Pac Sheet Metal Inc.** and sister company **OC Metals Inc.**

### Ran Out of Gas, Literally

Along with a crash course in business, Kurtz said she had to learn to do the simple things. In the first month after her husband's passing, she ran out of gas three times.

"I was so furious with myself," she said. "That's how vulnerable I was. I swore to never be in that position again."



**Kurtz: "Some women like shoes, clothes and jewelry. I love machinery"**

Kurtz was one of six entrepreneurs honored at the Business Journal's annual Excellence in Entrepreneurship award luncheon held March 17 at the Hyatt Regency Irvine.

The first few years leading the company were tough, according to Kurtz. But she said she leaned on her Christian faith and took each day as a business lesson.

"All I wanted to do was get things on solid ground," she said. "There were so many challenges, so many obstacles."

### More were on the way.

Before the recently ended recession, nearly all Cal Pac and OC Metals clients were in the then-booming homebuilding in-

dustry. When the housing market crashed, so did business.

"That was a defining moment for me," Kurtz said. "I knew being a residential contractor and manufacturer wasn't going to work."

So she looked into other markets, including the solar industry.

Kurtz and new husband Brent Kurtz, a former professional hockey player, invested their life savings into their new business model.

They bought machines for sheet metal roofing and solar attachments.

"It was a big risk, but that's what you have to do," said Kurtz, a 2004 Business Journal Women in Business award recipient.

### Growth

The move paid off and opened up business in commercial and industrial markets, according to Kurtz.

In August, she brought in partner David Lee who helped the company expand into heavy gauge metal manufacturing.

In the past few years, Kurtz's companies have grown from about 100 local customers to more than 500 nationwide.

About 50 people are employed at a 23,000-square-foot Santa Ana plant.

The companies expect to bring in about \$8 million in revenue this year, double from a year earlier.

Kurtz said she relishes her role as a woman in a largely male-dominated industry.

"Some women like shoes, clothes and jewelry," she said. "I love machinery."