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Focus SECTION

Eagle Express Flies High

It all began in Joni Suller's driveway — the idea for Eagle Express, a retail distribution trucking company based in Harmans, that is. The company is not "... just a common carrier" due to its emphasis on customer service, said Suller, president and founder. "We have ongoing, long-term relationships with our customers."

A Hagerstown native, Suller got into the distribution trucking business at the urging of her brother, who had been driving for a large paper products company. She had been working for Bell Atlantic for 10 years when her brother pointed out that she was living in what is known in trucking circles as "Freight Alley," as the northern Anne Arundel County area is proximate to a large number of trucking operations.

Suller applied for, and received, minority contractor status. She bought a van and, based out of her driveway, began taking contracts from larger carriers, carrying paper products, medical supplies, "... even ... a casket," she said.

As business increased, she bought another van and hired people to help her. "It was a learning process," Suller said. Retail distribution involves taking a large, "fluid loaded" 53-foot trailer of goods, usually from a customer's warehouse or distribution center, off loading and sorting those goods, and reloading the sorted goods onto a smaller truck for distribution from a hub point that services a given area.

Many large trucking companies do not want the added responsibility of sorting the goods and doing the more localized deliveries. "The big guys just drop the skids. Retail is not good for them," Suller said, pointing



The Eagle Express depot is located along "Freight Alley" — Shipley Avenue in Harmans.

out that her operation includes sorting and segregating and offers a place to do that work. "No one wanted to do the retail distribution."

In 1997, UPS went on strike and Eagle was positioned to pick up some business with Pitt Ohio Express Line, a large regional carrier. "The timing was perfect," said Suller.

Pitt Ohio gave Eagle a portion of its Fashion Bug account. "I brought in family, rented trucks [and] pulled it together," Suller said, and eventually received the Fashion

Bug account on her own. She served 60 stores and did such a good job that she was given 60 more stores a few weeks later.

That meant the business that she had started in her driveway was moving forward in full gear.

Currently, Eagle Express does about \$4-4.5 million annually in business. Suller called Eagle a "relatively small company," but it operates 20 24- to 26-foot straight trucks and 15 or 16 53-foot trailers. The company does

business in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia. Current customers include Fashion Bug, Modell's Sporting Goods, Pella Windows (for Lowe's) and 9 West.

"We are a link in the [distribution] chain," said Suller, "but we are a better link because Eagle Express takes more of an interest."

Her minority status has proven valuable for Eagle, and last May the company purchased and moved into its new 40,000-square-foot quarters on Shipley Road in Harmans. It was in bad condition, but the company renovated the property and added a state-of-the-art security system. The relocation was facilitated by the Anne Arundel Economic Development Corp.

"I measure success by my energy level and my love of the job," said Suller, noting another measure of Eagle's success — that her daughter, the youngest of her three children, wants to work toward taking over the business.

