

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Ad agency is built on long-term relationships

Burford's business and their marriage now span 27 years

BY JOAN EDWARDS

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

In some ways, Doug and Nancy Burford are opposites.

He likes summer sports; she likes winter sports.

He works in the creative side of advertising; she works in the financial side.

Despite their differences, the Burfords, who were married 27 years ago this week,

have worked together in building an advertising agency that is highly regarded by clients and competitors alike.

They are co-owners of Burford Company Advertising, which, like their marriage, started in 1968.

"Doug has done something that a lot of people in this business have been unable to do," said Bob Barber, president of Barber, Martin & Associates. "He's run a successful business for twentysome years. He has a great reputation all along the way. His reputation is well-earned, and reputation is important."

Billings of \$10 million

Today the agency at 104 E. Cary St. has billings of \$10 million, while employing a staff of only 10 people.

"We do a lot of big accounts for our size," Burford said. "We have it down to a science. We don't have account executives. We are pretty streamlined."

The agency stays streamlined by using many free-lance workers on projects, his wife added.

"Richmond has a multitude of those, particularly for specialized projects," she said.

The company offers complete marketing, creative, copy and design for print, broadcast, direct mail and infomercials.

"We are full service," Burford said. "We're not limited to public relations. We place all media. We do everything."

Burford began his career at Martin & Woltz Advertising in Richmond.

"They put me in a bedroom with a desk and one chair and gave me 45 dockets to write copy for," he said, shaking his head. "I hadn't written anything before in my life! I thought to myself, 'I really don't enjoy this.' So one day I got on the elevator, pushed the down button and never came back."

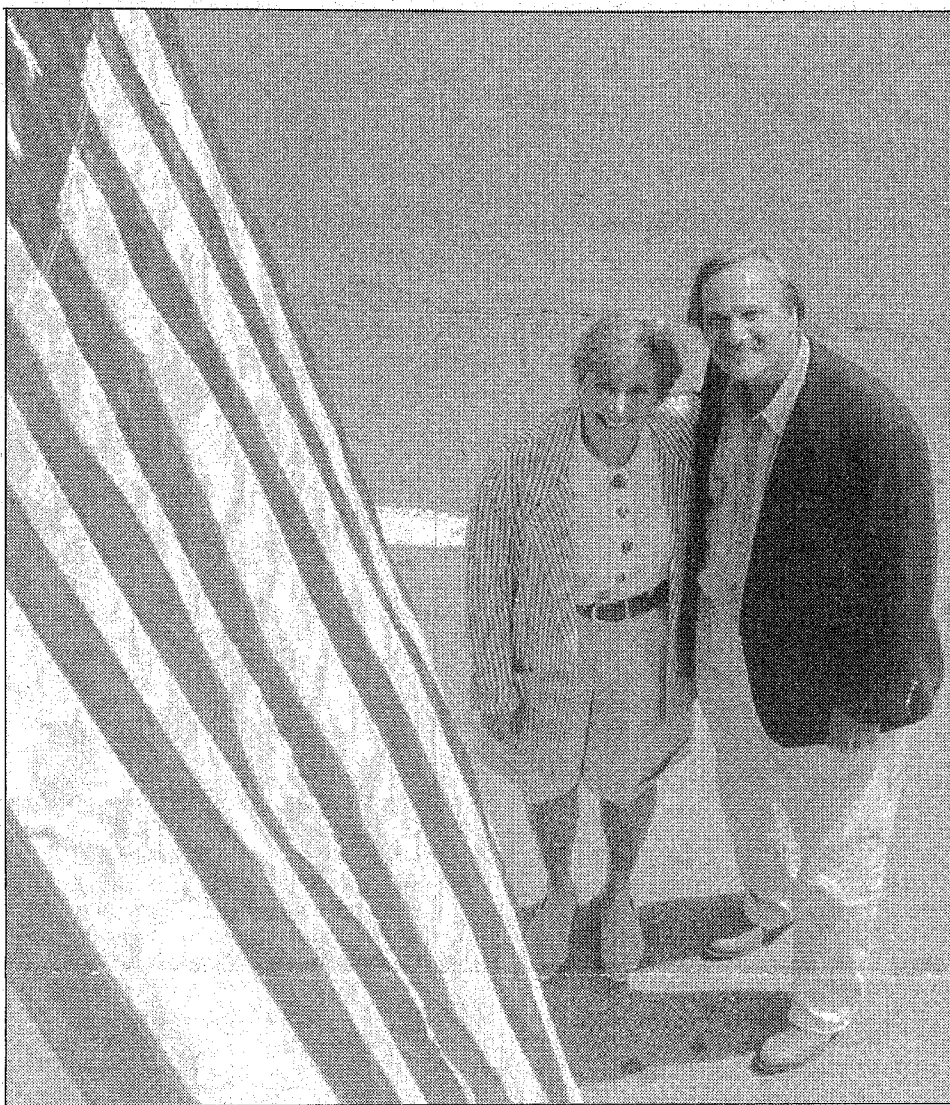
Electronic car first display

That decision resulted in Burford forming a company with his wife. The agency's first job was to build a display — an electronic slot car equipped with best-selling titles — for a publisher.

"They loved it and they paid me, and I paid the first month's rent," Burford said, adding that the agency's early days were a struggle. "Each month you didn't have a clue as to where the money would come from, but it was fun."

Gradually, the business grew as the Burfords gained recognition for their work. Burford recalls that one of his earliest accounts was Kelly's, a fast-food chain.

"They had lost a share of the market and had to rebuild it. My advice was to start with



MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

PATRIOTIC CAMPAIGN. Nancy and Doug Burford's advertising agency started a campaign in 1992 urging Americans to buy goods made in the United States.

the kids. So I created a 9-foot dragon — Kelly's Dragon," he said. The chain used the dragon in their advertising and changed the menu to include Dragon burgers and Dragon juice.

Another campaign that won recognition was Van Diver's, a local furniture store. When Burford was called in to pep up the company's advertising campaign, he made one suggestion: Paint the building yellow.

"It became the Ugly Yellow Building," Burford said.

Long-term relationships

The Van Diver's ads Burford created were populated with zany characters who

expounded the benefits of shopping at the Ugly Yellow Building.

The Burfords say their agency's staying power is based on their long-term relationships with clients.

"While we want to add new business, we have a client base that has been with us for five years or more," Nancy Burford said. "We watch our customers grow — like [home builder] Eagle Construction. It's important that they are satisfied. It's great for us."

"I don't need to get every car dealer on every corner," Doug Burford added. "Money is important but not that important. We want to enjoy what we do. Every account is almost like a personal friend."

One account the Burfords particularly enjoy is the Christian Children's Fund. They recently traveled to Kenya to prepare commercials for the fund.

In one commercial, the camera scans black-and-white photos of children while the song "Amazing Grace" is sung.

'Amazing Grace'

"There was no spoken copy," Burford explained. "You know the feeling you get when you hear the song. You get the same feel when you save a child. That spot is producing the most responses for them, more than anything they have done."

Burford said the idea for the commercial came to him after noticing the effect the song had at a local nightclub.

"We were out one night, and everybody was arguing; fighting over darts. The singer started singing 'Amazing Grace,' and you could hear a pin drop. Everybody stopped what they were doing."

Bob Jones Jr., a photographer and owner of Bob Jones Jr. Inc., handles the photography for the Christian Children's Fund ads. He has worked with the Burfords since 1977.

"[Burford] is a creative person with good ideas. . . . He lets me do my own thing. He tells me the concept and allows me to use my creative talent," Jones said.

Another person who has worked with Burford is Wayne Westbrook, vice president of Main Street Production Co.

"I was not savvy to the business world. Doug gave me a break," Westbrook said. "In 1992, I called Doug and asked, 'How can our companies work together?' [Since that time] it's been one of the most rewarding professional relationships this company has ever had. He's one of our biggest clients."

Westbrook's business associate, Lockie Fuller, president of Main Street Production, agrees. Fuller, who is responsible for new business, said, "I talk to and work with agencies across the East Coast. I see a lot more people when I am in the bidding process. A lot of people don't want your input. Burford is exactly the opposite. They are team players. They are open to suggestions. That is not always the case in this industry."

Works with local businesses

The Burfords believe in employing and working with local businesses, she added. "They are loyal to the people they work with. Doug is a proponent of buying local. He's very in tune to the fact that they are going to work with local businesses. A lot of people in the industry look out of the state to find a team to produce their work."

Burford's sense of local loyalty took on a different dimension in 1992. He started an advertising campaign after Japanese officials made disparaging remarks about the American work ethic. The ads featured footage of 100 Richmonders who gathered outside his office to "pledge their allegiance" to buying U.S. goods.

At their Cary Street office today, Doug Burford works upstairs in the creative department, and Nancy Burford is downstairs in the financial area.

"When I come downstairs and infringe, they send me back upstairs," Burford says with a laugh.

The Burfords do manage to get together for lunch each day, they add.

The arrangement seems to have worked well for them and their clients for 27 years.

"I can't imagine what it would be like not working together," Nancy Burford said.

THE RÉSUMÉS

Name: Douglas J. Burford, co-owner, Burford Co. Advertising.

Born: Feb. 18, 1943, in Washington.

Education: Bachelor's degree in advertising, Richmond Professional Institute (now part of Virginia Commonwealth University).

Family: Wife, Nancy; two daughters, Ashley and Ardis; and a son, Jason.

Career path: Copywriter, Martin & Woltz Advertising, Richmond, 1966-67; co-owner, Burford Advertising 1968 to the present.

Spare-time pursuits: Sailing, racquetball, windsurfing.

Name: Nancy Burford, co-owner, Burford Co. Advertising.

Born: Aug. 20, 1945, Richmond.

Education: Attended VCU.

Career path: Sales, Higgins Typography, 1968-1969; co-owner, Burford Advertising, 1968 to the present.

Spare-time pursuits: Snow skiing, sailing.