

CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

www.craindetroit.com Vol. 27, No. 41

OCTOBER 3 - 9, 2011

40 under 40

Meagan Hardcastle, 39

Director of Turnaround and
Corporate Finance

O'Keefe & Associates LLC
Bloomfield Hills

■ **Biggest achievement:** Helping a multigenerational company overcome union, labor and financial obstacles.

■ **Current goal:** To one day become an entrepreneur in the turnaround industry.

Meagan Hardcastle realized her passion for turning around distressed companies while working as a commercial banker in the workout department.

She was working in a division of a bank that dealt specifically with businesses in danger of defaulting and felt many of the failing businesses could succeed if they were offered guidance.

"I saw what to me were heartbreaking outcomes in situations where there could be a better outcome," Hardcastle said. "I thought if someone could just tell the business owner about options A, B and C, the company could survive. But no one told them what to do or gave them advice."

So Hardcastle went back to school, earned an MBA at the **University of Chicago** and took a job that would allow her to pursue her passion: helping turn around distressed companies.

Since then, Hardcastle has built a track record of resuscitating seemingly unviable businesses back to life.

She has spent the last year working as the Chief Restructuring Officer at Frankfort-based **Graceland Fruit Inc.**, a mid-size producer and manufacturer of dried fruits and vegetables.

John Blight, vice chairman of the company, said Graceland Fruit was close

to insolvency before Hardcastle arrived and drafted a restructuring plan.

Blight said Hardcastle increased revenue by several million dollars and increased the gross margin from single digits to the low teens. Specific details of how she managed to right the ship are confidential.

"She was instrumental in the company's success," Blight said. "She has been very decisive and cut right through to the main issues, and now our growth margins are better than they were before she came."



"She is basically still in charge right now," said Sue Koss, director of litigation support at O'Keefe and Associates." There is a transition period, but she ran the company for about a year."

Before Hardcastle began the turnaround effort at Graceland Fruit, she was put in charge of fixing a client company to Royal Oak-based **Advanced Manufacturing Group**, an operational turnaround consulting firm. One project for Advanced Manufacturing involved grappling with labor issues, including a unionized labor strike. Hardcastle even had to cross a picket line. Hardcastle says changing what would otherwise be a negative outcome is the most rewarding aspect of her job.

"There is a sense of accomplishment that comes with achieving something that is difficult, and it's rewarding to save jobs," she said. "A lot of the companies I help are an important part of the economic fabric of a community. If you don't save those jobs, there is a rolling effect in the community."

Hardcastle says her experience working in myriad industries has taught her that regardless of the product a company makes, there is a commonality among all successful businesses. "The nuances of an individual business are much less important than people usually think," she said.

"The foundation and disciplines of a successful company are the same across all industries, and working with lots of companies allows me to apply best practices from other situations to the client's situation."

— Nathan Skid