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BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY

"I walk in the door and go left, she walks in and goes right ..."

**First, they found each other,
then they founded an IT business**

Integrated Talent that compliments them perfectly

BY ALLISON CONNOLLY
THEVIRGINIAN-PILOT

NORFOLK — It was love at first sight for the then 17-year-old Casey Robinson. He walked into his mom's dress shop and saw her — a beautiful Cuban girl named Denise, with long brown hair and big brown eyes, standing behind the cash register. Casey couldn't wait to ask his mom who she was, so he walked across the street to a pay phone, called the store and asked her out. Denise agreed to a date. Then marriage. And later, a business venture.

Today the couple, both 48, own Dataline Inc., an information technology systems integrator for government and commercial customers. It has 365 employees. The Norfolk company's annual sales top \$80 million, and its products can be found in places as varied as corporate offices in America and the battlefields of Iraq.

Denise is president and oversees the company's finances and administrative duties, while Casey is chief of operations, driving the sales force and product development. "The good thing about us is, we have two different talents," Casey said. "I walk in the door and go left, she walks in and goes right." The story of the company's success has as much to do with the Robinsons as it does their products. The two never went to college, deciding early on that they could learn more about business by working for one.

Initially, Dataline sold computer hardware by direct mail. It later branched into IT integration.

After a stint with the Virginia Beach Fire Department, Casey persuaded Denise to take over his father's job as publisher of Navy News, a free weekly tabloid his father had started more than 50 years before aimed at the Navy community in Hampton Roads. To this day, they say it's the toughest job they ever had, selling enough ads every

week to keep the paper rolling off the presses. They sold it in 1986. Four years later, they founded Dataline and sold computer hardware by direct mail, mostly to local businesses. "Back before 1990, there was no Best Buy or Circuit City," Denise said. "That's how it was done." In 1993, the duo hired people with software and technical experience and got into IT integration, building computer networks using existing or "off-the-shelf" technology. The business took off: The Robinsons went from fewer than five employees, including themselves, to more than 250 in the span of eight months.

Nigel Buttery, senior vice president of Dataline's commercial division, remembers the reaction from his colleagues at Digital Equipment Corp. when he told them he was leaving to be the seventh employee at Dataline. He was a sales account manager for Digital, which at one time was the third-largest computer company in the world. "Everyone thought I was crazy," Buttery said. "My wife was worried." He wanted to work for a smaller company with less bureaucracy and closer contact with customers. He said he gets that at Dataline. "You can't make a decision whether to support operations in Iraq eight weeks from now," he said.

As a minority-owned small business, Dataline qualified for the 8(a) government program that sets aside federal contracts for such companies. Dataline thrived, and thanks to repeat business, it no longer needs assistance. By the time it graduated from the smallbusiness program, only 17 percent of its revenue came from 8(a) contracts, Casey said. The rest were competitively bid. In this business of reselling and systems integration, it's more about the people than the equipment, said Dataline customer Steve Hanes, director of information technology at The Martin Agency, a Richmond ad agency with

national accounts such as UPS, Hanes and Geico. "A lot of these companies can get the product you're looking for," Hanes said. "You need people who know what they're talking about."

The relationship started two years ago with one product, a server that could handle large media files. Now Dataline is the agency's primary vendor, Hanes said.

Dataline's business is no longer local. It has offices in Richmond; Herndon; Gaithersburg, Md.; Charleston, S.C.; Atlanta; Tampa, Fla.; and San Diego.

Dataline's profile rose dramatically when it was



Denise
Robinson
President

Casey
Robinson
Chief of
Operations

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**"The good thing about us is,
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- CASEY ROBINSON



MORT FRYMAN/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Running a multi-million dollar corporation is a family thing with the Robinsons. Denise, Pres. of Dataline, and husband Casey, right, Chief Operating Officer, talk with employee Vic Ferson, a Systems Analyst.

picked as one of the many subcontractors on the almost \$9 billion Navy-Marine Corps Intranet project headed by Electronic Data Systems Corp.

The project, which is ongoing, has been as controversial as it is ambitious. It aims to connect more than 350,000 computers and consolidate 1,000 different networks around the world through a node in Norfolk. It has been fraught with cost overruns and delays. Dataline's contribution to the contract was very small and is over.

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Dataline: Family, work mean little spare time for the Robinsons

JOINT EFFORT

Casey and Denise own Dataline, Inc., an information technology systems integrator.

Denise is President and oversees the company's finances and administrative duties, while

Casey is the Chief of Operations, driving the sales force and product development.

Overall, their business is split 60-40 between the government and commercial sectors, respectively. Last year Dataline was one of eight companies picked by the state of Virginia to supply storage services to state agencies. The state spends about \$5.8 million each year on storage. Dataline shares an almost \$50 million contract

with five other suppliers to install and support security systems aboard Navy ships and Military Sealift Command vessels. Last week it won the first order under that contract, for \$353,000.

And its latest product takes Dataline further into battle. The Ultra Light Kit is a compact version of its Mobile Command Center, which allows generals to watch CNN, surf secret Internet connections and send e-mail over a secure network simultaneously. They can do it from the air, aboard a C-130, for example, or from a tank in the middle of the desert.

The unit, which is built with off-the-shelf hardware, comes in a leather suitcase and fits in the overhead bin of a commercial airliner. It uses folding satellite dishes to transmit data. The cost of the kit and its base unit, plus tech support, is between \$200,000 and \$300,000, depending on the bells and whistles. So far, 80 kits have been used in the field over the past three years.

"I've been in the back of a helicopter with a grease pencil and a map trying to track 24 helicopters," said Vic

Ferson, a major in the Army Reserve and a systems engineer for Dataline. "Now we can use a laptop."

The Robinsons say business is good, but they still don't have much spare time these days with their son, Jake, 11, and daughter, Callie, 9.

Before the kids, they thought work was their priority. Since then, they have tried to instill a sense of family at the company. Their children's photos and drawings take up most of the wall space in Casey's conference room.

They bought a popcorn machine and regularly hold movie nights for employees and their kids.

On this day, the two had to be at two different soccer fields by 5:30 p.m.

"We have a family of Type A's, so everyone wants to get what they want," Denise said.

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