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## Karl Willig takes the helm at Mission Linen

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Karl Willig is the definition of a businessman. The 65-year-old has spent decades doing what he loves most — building companies — and now he's coming out of retirement to take the helm of a Santa Barbara institution that's been around longer than he has: Mission Linen Supply.

The Idaho native has headed several national companies, ranging from agriculture to restaurants to real estate, but he's best known in the Tri-Counties as the founder of InfoGenesis, a Goleta tech company that started with four people and made a fortune for investors when it was sold.

Now, the 32-year resident is putting his years of experience and business savvy back into Santa Barbara as the president and chief executive officer of Mission Linen, a linen and uniform rental service founded in 1930.

"I certainly came here without doing a whole lot of laundry, so I've got a lot to learn in terms of the specifics of the industry," Willig told the Business Times. "But in terms of scale and complexity of operations, I have a lot of related experience. I have a background in running operations that are highly diversified, both geographically and industrially."

Willig was recommended for the position by Linda Page, Mission Linen's chairman of the board and previous CEO. Page is the daughter of founder George Page, who started the business 79 years ago with little more than a dinghy and determination.

"The family has grown the company virtually from a rowboat to its present size, which is — in my mind — an amazing tribute to their industry," Willig said. "There just aren't that many companies that have been around for eight decades and have grown and prospered throughout that time. He built an incredible legacy, and Linda has pretty much been in charge since his death about 15 years ago."

Page will be stepping down as president, but will retain her seat as chair of the board. She said in a release that Willig was the right fit for the job because of his extensive experience and commitment to the community.

"Linda told me to cling tenaciously to the values and principles upon which this business has been built and grown and grow the business aggressively, both in revenues and profits, for the benefit of the employees and the shareholders," Willig said. "Wise words, and no small challenge."

His schedule has been chock-full of meetings since he started on Sept. 24. The company is in its early planning stages for 2010, and Willig is determined to be a fly on the wall at each and every meeting.

"I've admonished everyone at the beginning of the meetings to pretty much ignore me, because I just want to sit and listen," he said. "These people run a very effective and very efficient business, and it would be highly presumptuous of me to walk in the door and suggest that I would know how to run it better than they do."

Willig said his first order of business is to develop a plan that responds to the charge he's been given by Page: greater efficiency and faster growth.

And he's equipped to deliver. Not only does he have a Harvard MBA, but the last company he headed on the South Coast — a software development company called InfoGenesis — is now owned by Agilisys, a Nasdaq company.

InfoGenesis continues to prosper; the company does business in more than 50 countries, and Willig said it's the second-largest company providing hospitality transactional applications on a worldwide basis.

Willig first came to California in 1977 to work for Sambo's, a NYSE-traded company headquartered in Santa Barbara. At the time, Sambo's 60,000 employees and 1,150 locations made it the largest chain of company-owned restaurants in the world. He joined the company as vice president,



COURTESY PHOTO

Karl Willig, founder of Goleta tech firm InfoGenesis, has now taken the helm at Mission Linen Supply.

became chief financial officer and then president and CEO.

He also spent time in time in Chicago on the mercantile exchange and in Phoenix at the Arizona-Colorado Land & Cattle Co. Every once in a while he gets an offer to head east, but Willig said he will turn it down every time.

Willig is a permanent Santa Barbara resident now for "a number of factors, not the least of which is my wife's love for the Central Coast of California. I have the occasional opportunity to go elsewhere, and she said, 'You can go, but I'm staying here.' We've got 38 years of marriage behind us, and I was reluctant to break that record down."

After selling InfoGenesis, Willig spent most of his downtime in the Tri-Counties as a director for a few regional companies — small potatoes for a guy like him — and became board chairman of the Santa Barbara Rescue Commission and a vice presi-

dent of the Los Padres Boy Scouts Council.

It didn't take long before he caught the eye of a few area businesses and was asked to consult. That's how Page found him.

"After working with the board chairman for a several weeks, I was asked to consider becoming the president and CEO of the company," Willig said. "That [decision-making] process took about six weeks because I was used to semi-retirement!"

Now that he's on board, Willig has big plans for Mission Linen and its upcoming 80th anniversary. Big, green plans.

"There's a green overlay on everything we're doing," Willig said. "It's important to us for purely altruistic reasons but also business reasons as well. Conducting a green business is doing smart business, and we will continue to make that a significant criterion in all of our business decisions."