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MISSISSIPPI BUSINESS HALL OF FAME

By Jeff Ayres

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For more than 60 years, Marty Davidson has done what he can to make sure the family business is thriving. But this family business isn't a shop on a street corner. It's a multistate operation based in Meridian that employs about 800 people. Southern Pipe & Supply Co. has become one of the nation's largest independent wholesalers of plumbing, heating and cooling products under his guidance. The company operates more than 100 branch offices in seven states. It's been an eventful 2008 for Davidson. In addition to the Hall of Fame recognition, the company opened its 100th branch and is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year. "It was important to carry on the family tradition. I did not want to break the chain," he said. Davidson started working at an early age at the company his grandfather started in 1938. "We want you to work from the bottom up," Davidson said his father and uncle told him. At age 5, he stocked shelves, and as a teenager he worked for the company after school. He progressed through the ranks and became Southern Pipe's president in 1969 at 28 years of age. "It was appropriate. It was the right way to do it," he said.

When he assumed leadership, Southern Pipe was at a crossroads - continue being successful with what you have or grow the company, even if that means adding debt? At the time, the company had four branch offices and a presence confined to Mississippi. Davidson decided to grow the company. Southern Pipe added heating and cooling services to its core plumbing business. Five years ago, the company launched Southern Bath & Kitchen, a designer showroom spotlighting upscale kitchen and bath design. There are now more than 60 showrooms in the Southeast, and Southern Pipe has offices in Georgia, Arkansas and Tennessee.

Davidson is also a fixture of eastern Mississippi's professional and civic landscapes.

He is a former president of the Southern Wholesale Association and past chairman of the East Mississippi Business Development Corporation. Wade Jones, EMBDC's president, said Davidson has a knack for planning and executing strategies to lure more business to eastern Mississippi. During Davidson's leadership of the group, the area was able to attract several major companies that collectively brought hundreds of jobs to the Meridian area, Jones said. "He's results-oriented," Jones said of Davidson. "He seldom seeks recognition." But he's earned a number of accolades nonetheless, including the Neville Humanitarian Award for his work with a Meridian group that serves the homeless. Davidson is proud Southern Pipe has remained independent, noting he gets calls daily from people interested in buying the business. He not only wants to keep the business in Mississippi but have it remain a family affair. His son, Jay, is the company's

president, and Davidson jokes he's already shown tapes about the company to his 7-year-old grandson in hopes he'll make Southern Pipe a fifth-generation family business. The secret for Southern Pipe's success, Davidson said, is simple: Surround yourself with good people. "We call them 'family,' "he said of Southern Pipe's employees. "We feel if you keep employees happy, the customer is going to be happy."

To comment on this story, call Jeff Ayres at (601) 961-7050.

MARTY DAVIDSON

- Business: Southern Pipe & Supply Co., Meridian, specializes in plumbing, heating and cooling services
- Age: 67
- Education: MBA, Tulane University
- Family: Wife, Linda, two children and three grandchildren

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