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## Mary Rodriguez makes others' dreams reality

By Tom Barry CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**M**ary Rodriguez refers to herself as "a recovering CPA." "CPAs focus on the past," she said. "It's all about the past year — preparing tax returns, auditing, compliance. I like helping entrepreneurs look to the future and envision where they want to go. Bringing their dreams to reality is extremely exciting to me."

Her vehicle is HilRod Group Inc., the company Rodriguez launched in 1993 and where she serves as president. HilRod provides chief financial officer-type services to small and midsized companies, where the needs often are critical.

"I get just as excited about a client's success as my own," said Rodriguez, winner of the Rising Star Award in this year's Women Entrepreneurs competition, sponsored by the Atlanta chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO).

The award is given to a woman business owner "who has elevated her business and demonstrated exceptional achievement over the past year," according to NAWBO. Factors include growth, profit and "recognizable success."

HilRod Group has been on a steep upward arc since retooling its strategy amid the technology meltdown several years ago. During the past three years, revenue growth has averaged 33 percent annually. Revenue this year is expected to reach \$400,000, up from \$300,000 last year.

"We ask the hard questions," she said. "Maybe a vendor wants the company to take on more inventory. Well, those dollars could get tied up in an asset that loses value over time, not to mention having to store all that extra merchandise."

Multiply such questions many times over, and businesses can quickly dig a hole from which extraction is difficult.

"Mary has wonderful leadership skills, lots of energy and good ideas," said Rep. Fran Millar, R-Dunwoody, senior vice president of Palmer & Cay Inc.

HilRod has assisted Specialized Title Services Inc. since that company was launched 10 years ago.

"Mary's a consummate professional, someone who's respected by everyone in our office," said Patrick Quirk, director of operations for the 18-employee Atlanta firm, which does title searches for commercial real estate transactions.

Another client is Epic IT Inc., an Atlanta technology services firm. Controller Lauren



### Rising Star of the Year

*A women business owner who has elevated her business and demonstrated exceptional achievements over the past year. Areas of accomplishment include achieving business milestones in terms of growth, profit and recognizable success.*

Rocereta said Rodriguez's advice has been valuable in putting the business on a sound financial footing.

"It costs more if you have to fix things down the road," Rocereta said.

In its early years, the HilRod Group focused on developing business plans, raising capital and growing companies, many of them dot-com enterprises. Then came the technology crash.

"Not only current clients but future prospects were falling apart," Rodriguez said. "Venture capitalists were no longer readily handing out money, and the IPO market totally went away."

HilRod shifted gears to focus on turnaround management and providing outsourced financial services. "Actually, I had seen the handwriting on the wall and began turning the business in another direction," she said.

Rodriguez is vice president of strategic alliances (fund-raising) for NAWBO's Atlanta chapter.

"NAWBO has been a great experience for me," she said. "Its CEO Roundtables, for instance, give women a chance to bounce ideas off one another in a confidential environment."

Rodriguez grew up in a small town in West Virginia. Her mother's family operated a grocery store, while her stepfather worked in the coal mines. Her father ran his own business for two decades.

"From him I learned to get out on my own and to take risks," she said. "I also learned a lot working in that grocery store — about merchandising and not buying more product than you can sell (before it spoils). I learned that when the mines decline, coal miners can't pay their bills, and then the store can't pay its bills either. Those were great lessons to learn at an early age."

The lessons still apply. "I understand what



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happens to companies when they don't have adequate capital or make serious mistakes, either by spending too much money or not spending money soon enough," she said.

Rodriguez received her bachelor's degree and master's degree in accounting from the University of South Florida, and became a certified public accountant in that state. Her career has included many years in public accounting and financial consulting.

Atlanta has been home since 1989, when she moved here to lead the buyout of a \$20 million plastics extrusion company with her partner, David Hills. She went on to spend five years as vice president of finance and administration for the company (Wright Plastics).

"We needed to incorporate ourselves to buy the stock of the other company," Rodriguez said. "There we were, working these long hours to get everything done. It was around 2 a.m., and we still didn't know what to call the new company. Then someone suggested combining our names, and HilRod it was."

Rodriguez was named the state's Women in Business Advocate of the Year for 2004 by the U.S. Small Business Administration. She was NAWBO's Member of the Year in 2003.

Hills, a native of Great Britain who owns his own business, is now her husband.

"I guess it was working late all those nights," she said.