

In March 1993, on the day that his daughter was born, **John Vlahakis '85** had an epiphany.

"I realized that everything that was harming the environment would also be harming her," Vlahakis says, sitting in his office on a balmy summer morning in Winnetka, Ill. "I felt I had to make a difference for her, to make the world a better place for her."

So Vlahakis launched Earth Friendly Products, a manufacturer of green cleaning products for home and personal use. In many respects, it was a natural transition — Vlahakis had already worked several years for his father's company, Venus Laboratories, Inc., an industrial cleaning products manufacturer.

But Earth Friendly Products' mission was different: The company pledged to offer products that were made with natural ingredients; were safe for people, pets and the environment; and were competitive in performance, price and convenience.

"I kind of created my own definition of what 'green' meant to me," Vlahakis says, adding that the term wasn't often used in 1993. "I researched chemical sensitivities and toxic ingredients, and looked at changing out formulations to create greener products. I wanted to use plant-based ingredients, move away from petrol-based ingredients, and get rid of the dyes and synthetic perfumes that people were reacting [negatively] to." He came up with four products for home and personal use, and marketed them to independent grocery stores and natural food chains.

Nearly 17 years later, Earth Friendly Products' mission still stands — but the company has grown exponentially. It now boasts more than 60 products for bathroom, household, laundry, kitchen and pet use, with distribution across the nation as well as in the United Kingdom, Canada, South Korea, Israel, Iceland and Mexico.

According to Vlahakis, Earth Friendly Products is unique among its competitors in that it does not outsource the manufacturing process; its facilities are located in Illinois, California, Florida and New Jersey. Last year's sales topped \$54 million; this year they are expected to reach \$80 million. Vlahakis projects that sales for FY2010 will grow to \$120 million.

"The secret is distribution and finding the right price point to drive volume," Vlahakis says. "As you become more and more established as a brand, you keep building on that."

But Vlahakis is motivated by more than the growth of his business. He's excited to see that his products have actually improved the health of some of his customers.

"I didn't get sick while I was cleaning [windows]," one customer wrote recently. "Thanks so much for healing those of us who react to chemicals and petro-chemicals, which seem to be in almost all the products on the market." Wrote another: "I will never go back to other laundry detergents ... This one does the job, doesn't bother my sensitive skin or my equally sensitive nose, and doesn't harm the environment."

Vlahakis believes the success of Earth Friendly Products is encouraging corporate America to become a greener place.

"When I see companies like Clorox and SC Johnson getting into the green business, it tells me that we have risen on the radar screen,"

Vlahakis says. "We're forcing established companies that didn't look at the environment responsibly to start paying attention."

— Rachel Farrell



Clean and green

Through Earth Friendly Products, John Vlahakis takes care of the home, the planet and the bottom line