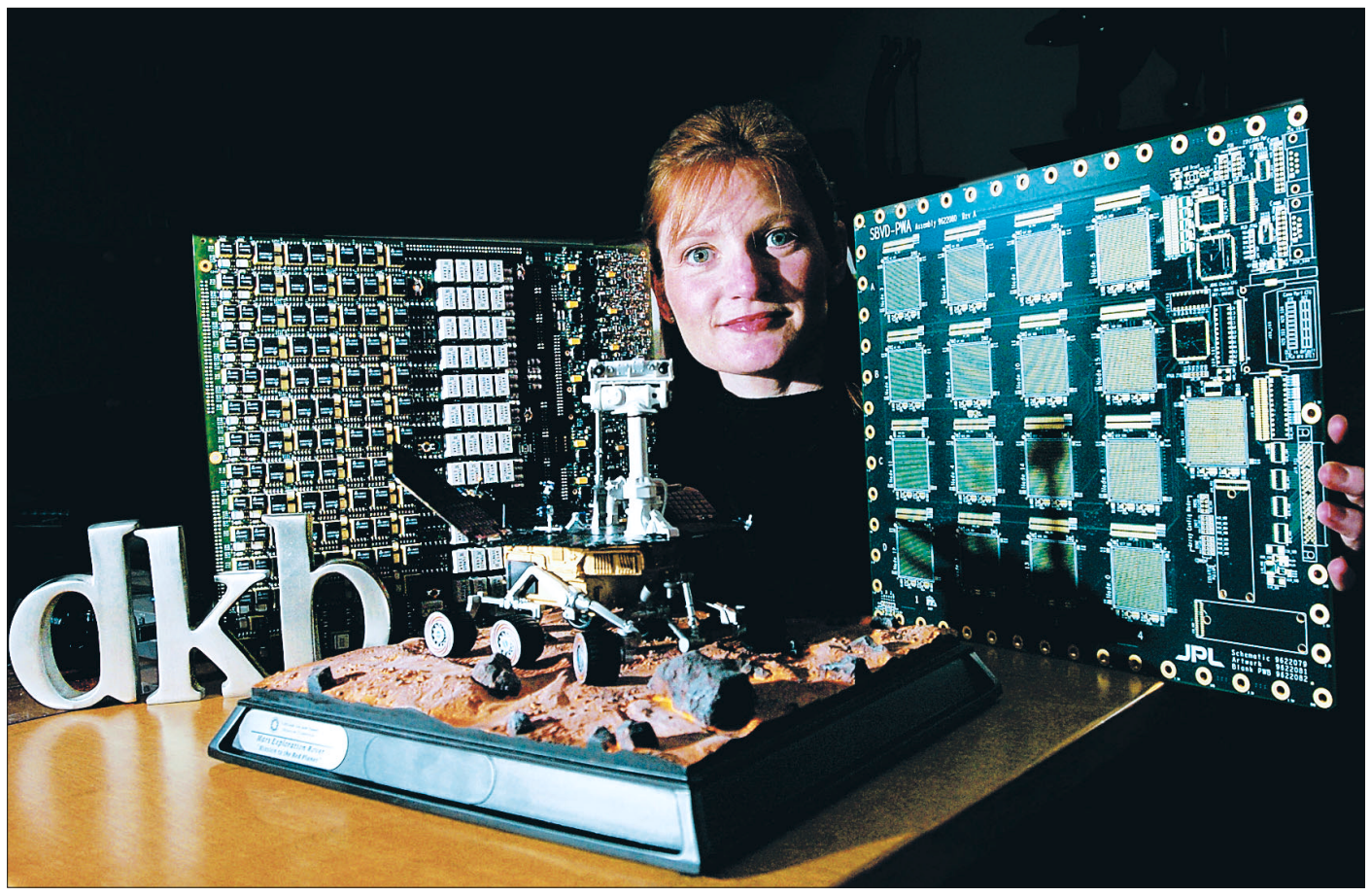
SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

SUNDAY
Business

DECEMBER 12, 2004

DKB Resources lands success with Mars rovers

By FRANK NELSON
NEWS-PRESS
STAFF WRITER



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

Darya Bronston, owner of DKB Resources, is seen here with a model of a Mars rover and some of the printed circuit boards her company helps produce. Such boards have played a key role in the success of the Mars program and numerous other industrial and defense projects.

The stuff they do at Santa Barbara-based DKB Resources really is rocket science, and company owner Darya Bronston and her team recently were recognized with an award from NASA for their work on the Mars rover program.

DKB Resources, a printed circuit board engineering, design and manufacture support company, played a key role in both Mars landers, Opportunity and Spirit.

The company won contracts lasting 18 months and worth more than $1 million to support design layout, manufacturing and program management for many of the circuit boards used in the cruise stage and the camera board that took documentation photos in the lander stage.

Such circuit boards, bristling with electrical components including computer chips, enabled the rovers to reach Mars by governing every aspect of the long journey, from power to communications to the cameras.

"I'm very proud we were picked to be a partner with NASA," says Ms. Bronston. "That was an incredible opportunity for us."

And NASA was proud of them.

Officials from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory came to Santa Barbara to honor Ms. Bronston and her associates and to present her with a special poster of the Martian landscape.

Guests at a celebration lunch watched a rover animation clip and listened as NASA representatives outlined the agency's goals for 2005.

It hasn't finished yet. DKB is already working on preliminary programs in connection with the 2007 Mars rover contract and should find out next year exactly which products the Jet Propulsion Laboratory has decided to include.

Ms. Bronston and her staff oversee sales, program management and client negotiations while working closely with four principal partners: NBS Corp., headquartered in Santa Barbara; CADWORKS, of Mission Viejo; CARTS LLC, located in northern San Diego County; and Sedona Board Services, based in New Hampshire.

Teams of specialist engineers, software programmers, designers and program managers combine under the DKB umbrella in a network of partnerships that Ms. Bronston says reduces overhead and costs while increasing flexibility and creativity.

Besides their success with the rovers, DKB and its partners work closely with defense industry giants such as Raytheon and Northrop Grumman, and can take credit for the engineering, design layout and manufacturing support of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory decoder boards.

These state-of-the-art pieces of technical wizardry are housed in Spain, Australia and California. They encrypt and decrypt communications with U.S. satellites, Mars rovers and other space research flights.

For a 34-year-old woman to own and run such a successful high-tech company surprises a number of people in the industry, none more so than Darya Bronston herself.

Ms. Bronston says she can hardly recognize the woman she was 10 years ago, when the creative, artsy student moved to Santa Barbara, enrolled at the Brooks Institute of Photography and worked as a lifeguard and a receptionist to help pay her fees.

She later worked for a company owned by Craig Arcuri, who became her mentor in the printed circuit board industry. Ms. Bronston learned the ropes, and by the time she left — after the company was sold twice and changed direction — she was regional sales manager for the Western states.

With the support of her husband, Matt, a commercial fisherman, and a number of others, Ms. Bronston was persuaded to start her own business, determined to make better use of the technical excellence and expertise she now knew was out there and not being fully used.

It was a huge leap, she says. The industry in 2000 focused mainly on providing printed circuit boards for telecommunications and was lucrative, with plenty of funding for research and development.

Ms. Bronston says there are pluses and minuses to being a relatively young female company owner in this high-tech business environment.

"It's very easy to be underestimated or discounted as a young woman in a very technical world," she says. "But that also gives me opportunities as I'm not seen as a threat. People are more willing to be open with me about information and what it is they want."

Ms. Bronston is the first to admit she's not a technical person and always struggled with math and chemistry. She says she was really intimidated at first, mixing with many of the top people in the industry, but it forced her to pay better attention and learn.

"Sometimes I wish I was more technical, but I have good people I can turn to," she says. "My real skill is in connecting people together. I have to make sure that communication is happening."

e-mail: fnelson@newspress.com