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FACE TIME

Spark of autonomy

THROUGH STREAM ENERGY, **CHRIS DOMHOFF** HELPS AN ARMY OF INDEPENDENT SALES AGENTS CHANGE THE WAY TEXANS BUY ELECTRICITY

After growing up in a rough working-class neighborhood, Chris Domhoff knew, as a 10-year-old, the meaning of effort. Domhoff, now 44, has modeled his life after his father's work ethic, and it's paid off. The Stream Energy co-founder saw an opportunity to enter the energy industry shortly after its deregulation. His passion for marketing encouraged him to start Ignite, Stream's marketing arm, and to incorporate multi-level marketing in the company strategy. A Mary Kay admirer, Domhoff models Ignite in a similar way, using independent agents to market its energy services. The commission the agents receive helps change their lives, he said, and it's something he's most proud of. Domhoff was interviewed by staff writer Phoebe Wu.

DESCRIBE YOUR FAMILY. I was born in Ohio and am the youngest of three — the baby. My parents have been together for 50 years. I've been married for 20 years. My son is 13 years old. I grew up in a very working-class Irish Catholic, Polish, German community in Toledo.

DESCRIBE YOUR FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MEMORY. Growing up in that neighborhood was rough-and-tumble. I saw a lot of people who had the work ethic my dad had. I would observe what my neighbors were going through. It really could be considered a blue-collar, middle-class neighborhood at best.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB? I was a big basketball fan growing up and wanted to work for the Dallas Mavericks after college. After being denied about five times, I went to work for my uncle selling office supplies. Then lo and behold, I got a job with the San Antonio Spurs. But I'm a diehard Dallas Mavericks fan to this day. I got my dream job as marketing manager and was there for five years.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO THIS INDUSTRY? It was a journey. After I moved from the Spurs to the House of Blues North America, I then got introduced to Excel Telecommunications. That's where I really learned how effective person-to-person direct selling could be and how effective network marketing can be in business. From there, I always had my eye on energy. I saw what happened in the deregulation of telecommunications and the billions and trillions of dollars that changed hands in that industry, just like the breakup of the airline industry a couple of decades ago. When energy got deregulated in the state of Texas, I jumped into that industry. A friend of mine put me in the same room as my current partner, Rob Snyder, who has the same vision I did.

WHO ARE YOUR ROLE MODELS IN THIS INDUSTRY? My heroes are my mom and dad, who really taught me so much in life. In the industry, there's two people that really stick out. Mary Kay Ash, for one. Growing up here in Dallas, I was here firsthand to see what Mary Kay morphed into. Currently, there's a gentleman named John Addison who heads up Primerica. He is perhaps the best CEO in our network marketing industry.

WHAT'S THE BEST ADVICE YOU'VE RECEIVED? My mother said that in life, don't underestimate how powerful an assist can be to people. Whether it's in your community or in your family, there's no greater treasure. From an Ignite standpoint, we've assisted tens of thousands of independent associates who sell energy for us to change their lives because of commissions from the company.

WHAT'S YOUR PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT? From a personal level, it's having the family that I do. From a professional level, it would be starting Ignite. In the early days, we affected hundreds of people, then thousands of people. Now it's tens of thousands. It's intoxicating to get lost in their success.

WHAT'S THE BEST BUSINESS DECISION YOU EVER MADE? It was starting Ignite and Stream Energy. When we came into the market, most of the consumers in Texas didn't know they had a choice in electric providers. We became educators in the marketplace. We educated consumers that they didn't have to be with their current provider. We thought we had a better business strategy. We wanted to be the Mary Kay of energy and have mom or dad introduce energy options to a brother or sister. When we came to market, only 8% to 10% of Texans had moved to another provider of services. After four-and-a-half years, 50% of consumers have switched to another provider.

WHAT'S THE WORST BUSINESS DECISION YOU EVER MADE? I wish we would have had a power agreement in place prior to the Katrina and Rita hurricanes. We now have a partnership with Constellation Energy in Maryland. They manage our energy

portfolio and our risk. Prior to the hurricanes, we didn't have that partnership in place. We learned our lesson very quickly and we created that partnership to take on risk for us. In turn, it makes us a more stable company.

WHAT DO YOU TELL YOUR EMPLOYEES TO LEAD AND INSPIRE THEM? I tell them to try to replace themselves. If you're a supervisor or manager or director and you're supervising people, you want them to eventually take your position someday. If you're doing that, you're going to just move up the ladder yourself.

WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU COULD LEARN TO DO? I would like to learn better Spanish. I'd like to learn to skydive.

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST PET PEEVE? Bad attitudes. When I speak to independent associates in the field or corporate employees, I tell them if they bring a good attitude, we'll train you to be successful. If you come with a crummy attitude, I'll show you the door. It's attitude.

WHAT IS SOMETHING THAT FEW PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT YOU? That I've been married 20 years.

WHAT DO YOU DO TO RELAX? I spend a lot of time with my family. I'm a fisherman and play a little basketball. I play chess with my son. I like to do outdoor activities.

WHAT PERSONAL PLANS DO YOU HAVE FOR THE FUTURE? Just helping my son become a man. Watching him mature and helping him through those tough teenage years.

