



#### FACILITY MANAGER PROFILE

## Commitment + Ownership + Responsibility + Compassion = Cindy Luis

By John Dunlap – Editor, SSA Globe

If you had a chance to see the movie “Sideways,” you no doubt enjoyed the spectacular scenery of the California wine country north of Santa Barbara. And if you are Cindy Luis, you get to enjoy that beauty every day—as well as a job as property manager of the Santa Ynez Self Storage operation in Buellton, California.

But don’t let the mellow beauty of life in the wine country fool you as far as Luis is concerned. She is an outgoing, personable professional who has been successfully operating Santa Ynez for the past five years.

Having “guts” is seldom a term one hears in self storage; mountain climbing, perhaps, or race car driving. But as far as Luis is concerned, having guts can mean the difference between losing to the competition and beating them. One gets the impression that her determination would likely also fuel her desire to climb mountains, should she want to do so. And like a motorsports driver, she is racing to success in the industry.

“I feel you need to have ‘guts’ in these times and in any business,” Luis says. “Don’t be afraid to fight your competition. Go the extra step in dealing with your customers. Extraordinary customer care has almost become a lost art.”

Luis moved to California from Wisconsin in 1982 and never looked back. She has owned and operated two national franchises, with Mail Boxes Etc. and The UPS Store, respectively. That experience came to the fore when she was offered a chance to manage Santa Ynez in 2004.

“There are a lot of similarities between those jobs and self storage,” Luis says. “You are working to get customers to rent spaces and you are also trying to make sure the customers that you have are happy and stay with you. We’ve even brought in a full-service UPS shipping setup to our self storage operation.”

Luis works as property manager for Litton Property Management, Inc., and says that Tom Litton has been a major contributor to her joy in working at Santa Ynez.

“I am very grateful for having the opportunity to work with people like Tom Litton, who has given me the opportunity to show my skills as a manager and has allowed me to show some of the techniques I believe have kept my customers loyal and happy,” she says.

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*Above: Cindy Luis, property manager at Santa Ynez Self Storage, stands in front of the Free Move truck at the facility.*

Luis has some cardinal rules for running her facility. They include:

- Commitment: "I feel you need to put your position as a manager on the top of your priority list."
- Take ownership: "Take care of your center as if it were your own."
- Responsibility: "Someone must be held accountable for everything that happens in a facility—good or otherwise. As a manager, it is yourself."
- Training: "Your ability to train your associates is a key. Without proper training we end up back at responsible and accountable."
- Compassion: "Everyone has a reason for storing with you, so be thoughtful, caring and helpful through whatever the transition. Always build rapport; it will lead to later referrals."

For Luis, the key to success on a daily basis starts with presenting an air of professionalism.

"Professionalism is so important," she says. "How you look, speak, your product knowledge and the training of your associates are all critical. Your first impression is what will count to prospective renters. Work harder than you expect your staff to."

The hard times that have beset America over the past few years have caused Luis to take stock not only of her business, but of the people who are her customers. She feels that being empathetic is an important quality for any self storage manager/operator these days.

"This economy is a difficult one," Luis adds. "I feel we are by no means recession proof. However, for every person who has given up the storage to save money, someone else is downsizing and looking to store their treasures they do not wish to part with. We try hard to be compassionate. This has helped us hold a respectful occupancy rate."

When Luis was asked what qualities she thinks have contributed the most to separating her from the pack, she responded, "Go the extra step. There are simple things you can do, like counting the customer's change back, another lost art. Bring them water on a hot day. Know your neighborhood. Build a great team within your center. All you need to do is care about your customers and they will take care of keeping your center occupied. Always look and be professional. First impressions are everlasting and presentation is 90 percent of the sale!"

So, even as she enjoys life in the gently-rolling hills of California's wine country, Cindy Luis has found that doing well in self storage can be savored just about as much as a fine glass of wine. ❖



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