Over 35 years ago, Jo Rae Wagner, her husband and her father were looking to start their commercial plumbing business in Corpus Christi. After someone suggested the Rio Grande Valley instead, Harlingen became the home for CTO Inc.

Since then, the president and owner of CTO continues to lead a successful career all while serving her company, community and industry at every level. With a background of over 40 years in construction, countless industry classes and a keen work ethic, Wagner is still very much involved in her company’s projects.

“I’ve actually handled every phase of the business – project manager, estimator, purchasing agent,” Wagner said. “Before CTO, I worked for a firm that did plumbing on the Navy ships when they were back at Long Beach. When we first started CTO, I was an estimator. And of course, if I needed to run equipment in the field, I did that too.”

Her company has grown to employ between 50 and 60 people and does work all over the Rio Grande Valley and state.

CTO Inc. is also a licensed air conditioning operation but primarily focuses on commercial plumbing with a specialization in medical facilities. Past company projects include Knapp Medical Center, Harlingen Medical Center and Doctors Hospital at Renaissance.

“We’ve been fortunate to be steady and I attribute that to the fact that we’ve been around for 38 years,” Wagner said. “We have an excellent reputation with contractors and builders
and we try to maintain our good standing with all of them. We truly have not had to do a lot of advertising.”

Wagner, who was born in Lockport, N.Y. and raised in Riverside, Calif., credits her team for the company’s success. Her son, Todd Aune, is the vice president of the company and many of their employees have been with CTO Inc. for years. The most rewarding part of Wagner’s career has been watching her employees grow and move up the company ladder.

“Both my son and I feel our employees are great,” Wagner said. “We don’t have a turnover problem. We’ve had people that have worked for us for 25, 27 and 30 years and our younger employees are learning from them. We consider them true professionals. Our newbie has been with us for eight years.”

Another source behind the company’s success has been Wagner’s and her team’s efforts to always make sure to be prepared before undertaking any project. So far, they have been pleased with all the company’s final products.

“Every day is a new day in construction,” she said. “At the end of the day, we look at the buildings that we had a part in constructing and there’s great pride. There is real pride in knowing that projects out there have our mark on them and we’re responsible for a lot of good buildings in the community.”

Wagner devotes the same wholehearted effort and resolve to her industry as she does to her company. She has made history by holding several local, state and national leadership roles throughout her career and continues to advocate for her profession.

Wagner was the first woman in 123 years to sit on the board of the Plumbing, Heating, Cooling Contractors National Association. In 2006 and 2007, she served as the president of the association, becoming the second woman to hold that position.

“This was probably one of the biggest honors I’ve ever had,” Wagner said of holding office in the national organization with over 4,000 members.

“My board was comprised of all males who actually accepted me very well,” she said. “And it made me proud to think that a small place like Harlingen could have a national officer. I have a nice wall of awards for the boards I’ve sat on.”

This past year, CTO was named national “Contractor of the Year” runner-up. On a local level, the company was named “Subcontractor of the Year” by the Association of General Contractors.

Wagner has also held memberships and leadership roles in several other industry-related organizations, at all levels, and is currently active.

“I still do a lot of work for the plumbing, heating and cooling industry,” Wagner said. “I work with our lobbyist in Washington.” She serves as the co-chair of the education foundation and chair of the government relations committee for the PHCC Association.
Wagner, an avid reader, continues working for her profession because she believes in its mission. She is currently working with a local college to get associate degrees awarded to plumbing professionals. “Plumbers are responsible for the health of the nation,” she said. “Think about what we’re responsible for, improper sewage disposal for instance. There’s a terrible shortage of plumbers right now and if we don’t start showing the respect that’s needed for this trade, we’re going to have a problem. The average age for a plumber is 54 right now. We need to do something and we need to do it in a hurry.”

Wagner also serves on several community organizations, including the Harlingen 100 Education Committee for the city. “I’ve lived in a lot of places over the years but the Valley’s my favorite.”