



***Livia Whisenhunt
President and CEO
PSenergy Group, Inc.***

From Convenience Store to Energy Entrepreneur

How many young women do you know who at nineteen years old would decide to buy their own convenience store? Probably not very many. But that's exactly what Livia Whisenhunt did.

A 1976 high school graduate from Stone Mountain, Georgia, with no college plans and no immediate job openings, Livia saw an ad in the paper for a convenience store that was being sold in the area. \$250 down and some creative financing bought her the title and ownership. From making sandwiches behind the counter to figuring out how much wholesale fuel she needed, Livia did it all. But when someone came along six months later and offered her a \$2000 profit, she took it.

Early Learning

The next step on Ms. Whisenhunt's "career ladder" would be to work for corporation based in Conyers, GA where she was able to apply her recently acquired knowledge in the wholesale fuel business. Four years later, however, Livia's learning curve was abruptly interrupted when she was fired. Rather than deterring her, this turn of events only served to strengthen her determination to move forward. And move forward she did, launching her own business in 1985 – PS Energy Group, Inc. – where she is currently president and chief executive officer.

Looking back, Livia also reflected on her Catholic, bi-cultural family upbringing. Her mother is from Cali, Columbia and provided Livia with a closeness to that side of her family that is just as strong as the American side. Livia is very proud of her roots, as well as the rest of her family which includes husband, Dewey Johnson, his son from a previous marriage, and four grandchildren. While she doesn't consider her company to be a family business, both her husband's son and her brother work with her. Her brother started the Information Technology department which is an indication of the direction that Livia's business has taken since its inception.

The Business Takes Off

Today, PS Energy Group is a sophisticated, diversified enterprise. It is not just a wholesale fuel business, but rather an energy resource company for business, industry, and government. Over the past ten years, the company has grown to 31 employees; moved its corporate headquarters from a little cottage in a residential neighborhood to a large-scale office complex in the Atlanta suburbs; expanded products and services dramatically and extended its service area nationwide; and has grown its revenue from \$16 million in 1990 to a projected \$120 million in 2001.

Clearly the force behind this phenomenal success story is Livia herself – although at times she seems a little "underwhelmed" by her own leadership. "If someone had told me 5 years ago that

things would be where they are now...” Livia stops in mid-sentence but the statement is still understood.

Leadership Insights

She also says that “the speed of the leader determines the pace of the pack” and she describes her own leadership style as “participative, fast, and fair but with a very low tolerance for incompetence.” Livia’s role models include women like Jackie Ward, former CEO of Computer

Generation and the first female chairman of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. She’s quick to add, however, that not all women leaders are role models and says she’s seen her share of bad ones.

In 1991, Ms. Wisenhunt was recognized by the Atlanta Chamber as their “Small Business Person of the Year” – one of many accomplishments for which she’s received local and national attention. She’s also #5 on the list of Atlanta’s Top 25 Women-Owned Firms and #139 on the latest Top 500 Women-Owned Businesses in the US according to *Working Woman* magazine.

If she were to give any advice to the next generation of female leaders and entrepreneurs, Livia said, “Be yourself. Mold your environment around who you are, not the other way around. Be sensitive to your people and to your customers. Understand that – just because you’re the CEO – you’re not #1. Lastly, don’t grow too fast unless you have capital.” This seems sage advice coming from a woman who ought to know and who has never had any venture capital invested in her company.

Coming Attractions

Thinking about the future, where does a forty-something, successful entrepreneur go from here? Well, Livia gets extremely animated when talking about what’s happened in the natural gas deregulation arena and her involvement with it. In 1997, she was appointed by Georgia’s former Lt. Gov. Pierre Howard as the only marketer to serve on the Joint House-Senate Natural Gas Study Commission. It’s obvious she has strong feelings about all the players in this process and will continue to be an influence in its final outcome.

Her most recent business project involves building a pipeline and bringing gas to an area where there is none – not in Georgia, but in West Virginia. Livia is excited about being a part of this newly developing area of Preston County and is working closely with officials there to serve both the business and residential communities, after first seeing gas flow to a local prison.

But here’s a real tip. Watch the latest best-seller list for a book which is tentatively entitled *Pipe Dreams* by new author, Livia Whisenhunt. That’s right - if she puts her pen to paper for an hour every day, and that’s indeed how she’s doing it, she says she could finish her first novel next year.

Livia may also be working on a future “exit strategy,” a merger or acquisition, or even an IPO if and when the time is right. Even so, this is not a woman who’ll be standing still any time soon. The best advice is to just pay attention and watch for the next chapter in the Livia Whisenhunt saga. As Livia would say, “The thought’s the deed.” For her, making things happen seems only an idea away.

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By Susan B. Hitchcock (Creator of the Age of SHEroes)

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