

Jan Funderburg
President – Consumer Services – BellSouth Corporation
(Previously President – Interconnection Services When Profile Was Written)

A Balanced Leader

Jan Funderburg is an excellent example of a successful executive who has learned to manage her time effectively between work and family responsibilities. Has it always been that way? Does she have any secrets to share? How DOES she do it?? The answer to those questions is NO, YES, and FOLLOW ALONG.

Some thirty years after beginning her BellSouth odyssey, Jan has an office on the 45th floor of one of Atlanta's downtown corporate skyscrapers and – as of two years ago – has risen to the rank of company officer. Her responsibilities include acquiring long distance relief for BellSouth, leading the Wholesale Business Unit, and managing regional surveillance and repair centers.

Even with her demanding role, Jan is determined to keep a balanced perspective of her life, what's important, and the type of leadership model she projects. "It's easy to get caught up in the whirlwind," she said. "But for me, most evenings - until about 10 p.m. when I turn on my corporate email - and week-ends are about family. Recently, I've taken up golf because that's what my teenage son, Will, wants to do when he's not playing football or hanging out with his friends. But what I tell my people is this: do what works for you and don't look at what I do because our needs and situations may be totally different. I run hard 8-5pm and 10-11:30pm Monday – Friday for BellSouth and other times, especially weekends, are for my family."

Three days a week, Jan takes Will to school in the mornings – their one-on-one time together, she says. Usually her husband picks him up and gets dinner. They are fortunate to have a grown daughter near-by who also helps. Occasionally, Jan's husband, Dave – an independent consultant – tells her point-blank, "Jan, you're getting out of balance." That's when Jan knows she needs to recalibrate, get back on track to leave the office at a decent time, and not take work home for a while.

Early influences

Jan's story really begins in St. Jo, MO as a child of divorced parents. Her mother remarried when Jan was five years old and she ultimately became the oldest child of a family of five. While she never had a relationship with her biological father as a child, she credits her step dad with being a major influence in her life. He was a career military man whose duty took the family to Europe for nine years and whose stern disciplinary style challenged Jan and her siblings to strive for perfection.

"While my Dad may have taken some things too far at times," Jan said, "like the weekly inspections we were exposed to - he nevertheless showed us the meaning of respect and caring. I learned a lot from him about leading with my heart, focusing on people who do the work and not the people in between, being organized, and not procrastinating. He definitely taught me responsibility."

One such lesson on responsibility came when Jan was 16 and she wanted a VW Beetle. Her dad found out the telephone company (Southern Bell at the time) was hiring in Atlanta. He took her to apply for the job and although she passed all the tests, they rejected her because her family was military and subject to relocation. As luck or providence would have it, however, they called her later and offered her the job. Jan accepted, and soon thereafter, with her first paycheck in hand and her dad's help, she got the VW. (Note: Although Jan no longer has the car, she still has her first paystub which she plans to frame along with her last one!)

In May, 1968, she graduated from Headland High School and became a fulltime employee – giving up a four year scholarship to Vanderbilt. Her rationale? “I didn't feel good about leaving Atlanta and my family while my dad was in Vietnam and frankly, I didn't want to give up the money I was making at Southern Bell either.” Later, as she was working her way up the corporate ladder, Jan attended Georgia State at night majoring in Psychology.

Learning from career progression

While long-term career objectives were not what motivated Jan to come to Southern Bell initially, it didn't take her or the company long to recognize that the match was a very good one. Her district level boss sent her to the assessment center when she was barely 18, and almost immediately, she was promoted to first level supervisor in Operator Services. “Most people who worked for me had more service than I was old,” she said. That, and many other challenges would lie ahead, but none would deter her. Her dad had taught her well.

Over the years, Jan has reflected on her experience with BellSouth and her numerous assignments and promotions since being a first level manager. “What I think has made the most difference in my career is that I've worked in virtually every department and it's been a constant learning experience. From Operator Services, to the Plant Department, to Human Resources, to the Business Office, to Marketing, and Sales – I've done it all,” she says. “I'm proud of the fact that I was probably the youngest district level manager in the company, but I did have six years service at the time having started work at 16.”

Her biggest disappointment? “Well, there was a ten year period when I felt my career was stalemated and I really didn't know what to do about it. During that time I had five different bosses and was their mainstay and continuity. I was indispensable to them. The problem was, there wasn't anybody there for Jan.”

Fortunately, that changed in 1991 when Judi North, BellSouth Consumer President, offered Jan a lateral assignment in her organization and became her mentor. “This was the first time that an officer of the company had taken an interest in me and my career progress,” Jan said. “There was mutual respect as well as friendship, and Judi provided me with ample opportunities for exposure to other officers as well as the latitude to lead. I'm forever grateful to her for her support and for being such a terrific role model.”

Perhaps the best way Jan can show her appreciation is to be a strong leadership role model herself. And based on what others say, that's definitely what she's become. At 52, Jan is enjoying her life as wife, mother, grandmother, and executive and she appears to be a good role model in every category. She enjoys golf, scuba diving, needlework and other crafts, and motor homing. She's also active in her church, United Way, and Woodruff Arts Center's Contribution Campaigns. She has received the YWCA's Outstanding Women of Achievement Award, Georgia Interconnection Association's Person of the Year Award, Top Sales awards and BellSouth's President's Award for Top Sales Region.

Among Jan's key learning points are these: "I know what it's like to lose a marriage because of work; that is not having your priorities straight between work and family. I have learned with Will to have the utmost respect for single parents. I couldn't make it as a parent without a supportive, and caring spouse. I believe it's up to each person to find balance in his / her own life. From a business standpoint, I try to utilize what I've learned: to lead with the heart, to realize if you are a leader you are the message to the organization, to understand people are your most valuable asset, and to properly coach and develop team members so they can accept higher levels of responsibility."

Wise words from a wise and highly respected leader. BellSouth's lucky that she wanted that VW way back when!!

Interview Completed November 2002
By Susan B. Hitchcock, VP-Client Services
Executive Director Women's Initiatives
Turknett Leadership Group
Creator of *the Age of SHEroes* Project