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A Multifaceted Leader's Life

If she weren't born to be a banker, Virginia Hepner could easily have become an art historian. But that's another story.

The fact is, Virginia *is* a banker with a very impressive track record. Her banking and financial career spans 20+ years and includes work in the Southeast and the rest of the country. In 1999, she was elected executive vice president and became the senior managing director of U.S. Corporate Finance at Wachovia.

She has held various assignments in corporate relationships management and capital markets. After Wachovia's 2001 merger with First Union, she became Co-Head of U.S. Industries in the Corporate and Investment Banking Division.

Virginia assumed her current position in February, 2003. Her primary responsibility is managing the relationship team that serves the needs of corporate banking clients across the Atlanta area and in select markets across the state.

One of the many attributes that distinguish Virginia is her "mutually beneficial view" of business and community service. It's not surprising, therefore, that Virginia is recognized outside the bank and within the community at large. Recently she was honored as one of *Atlanta Woman* magazine's "2003 Divas." She also chairs the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts Fund Advisory Board and serves as a director of the Atlanta College of Art and The Atlanta School. In addition, Virginia is on the Wharton School Undergraduate Executive Advisory Board at the University of Pennsylvania.

As important as Virginia's professional and social responsibilities are to her, they aren't as significant as her family, which includes her husband and their two children, Alec (11) and Vanessa (7). That Virginia is a devoted wife and mother is obvious. That she comes from a strong family foundation is equally apparent.

A Midwestern upbringing

Born in a small town in Arkansas, Virginia was the youngest of four children. Her father was a community banker and her mother, a homemaker with a master's degree in library

science. When Virginia was four, her family moved to Kansas City, MO where she grew up amidst sound values and basic principles.

“My parents taught us to be independent,” Virginia said. “They also taught us to be happy, to do well in whatever we did, and not to be motivated solely by money.”

“Of course,” Virginia added, “it didn’t hurt that they were good citizens and great role models themselves.”

As a student, Virginia loved to learn. “I loved history and art, but I was also good in math and accounting which I now consider my work tools.”

“Interestingly, even when I was very young, my father told me I’d make a good banker, but he never put any pressure on me to pursue it.”

“My siblings were equally encouraged and they turned out pretty well, too. My brother’s an architect, one sister’s an art historian, and the other’s a social worker. We were all fortunate to have a very supportive and stable upbringing. I think it clearly laid the foundation for who we are as adults,” Virginia continued.

That foundation was solidified with Virginia’s choice in higher education. She attended the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania where she earned a bachelor’s degree in finance. Several years later, after she began her banking career, Virginia earned a master’s degree in finance from the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

A career blossoms, a leader emerges

Unlike many finance majors who head to New York to pursue investment banking, Virginia opted for a different direction. “I was recruited by several New York firms,” Virginia said, “but I really wanted to live in the south.”

“Wachovia also recruited me and I particularly liked their company values as well as the location (Winston-Salem, North Carolina). Therefore, I eagerly pursued the opportunity.”

“I was competing with highly qualified young men and women for the position, yet I didn’t have an MBA. I did something unexpected in the interview: I told them that if they made me an offer, I’d accept. They did and I reciprocated. I’ve never regretted it!”

Virginia’s career decision clearly exemplifies the type of independent thinking her parents taught her. It also demonstrates self-confidence. Over the years, Virginia has developed both of these traits. They’ve become defining characteristics of her leadership.

At only 23 years old, she had the opportunity to move to Chicago where she began calling on commercial clients. “My clients ranged from \$100 million to billion dollar companies. I also traveled a lot in those years and I loved it.”

“But as much as I loved the work, I decided I needed more intellectual stimulation and so I quit the bank to pursue graduate school. It was another big decision, but my instinct told me it was the right one.”

Not only did Virginia get her masters degree, she also met and married her husband, adding a new chapter to her busy life.

As her career continued, Virginia had another interesting work experience, i.e., managing the banking education practice for Alcar, Inc. Alcar provided software and corporate finance education to the banking industry. Virginia called on banks and helped design the training they needed.

“What I liked about it was the art of teaching, which is really applied knowledge, and bringing clarity to an issue. What I missed was *doing* what I was teaching. I also learned a lot from my clients.”

“About that time, I received a call from Wachovia in Atlanta. They were building a Capital Markets Division and wanted me to join them. It was a critical decision, but again, it seemed like the right thing to do. I took the job and we’ve been here ever since, working and raising a family and trying to be involved in the community.”

Current perspective, challenges and opportunities

“For today’s younger generation, the business world can be a brutal place,” Virginia explained. “As a banker, I see and am exposed to all types of industries. I know the competition and the tremendous pressure to merge and to cut costs. A lot of talented people are out of work.”

“In my opinion, the biggest leadership challenge in our current environment is to gain commitment to the culture. You do that by building organizational trust. My job is to lead change and acknowledge that it will continue and to do so in a time when people find it risky to commit to one company. Realistically, I believe most people need and want to be a part of a successful team.”

“If I were giving advice to the next generation of leaders, I would tell them to know yourself and know what drives you. Be honest. Do your job well, be flexible, and be visible. Equally importantly, align yourself with people of character who are genuinely interested in you and marry sound business strategies with talented people. I believe that’s a strong formula for success.”

“Of course, success itself is not just about business but rather living your values with your family, your clients, and everyone with whom you come in contact.”

“I didn’t always have the experience for a particular position, but I had strong management skills. I also believe in assessing your team and tapping into the different strengths each person brings to the table.”

What great advice from an accomplished “Diva.” With a bright future ahead. – albeit in banking, art, or community service - Virginia Hepner is making an impact now. In the process, she’s contributing significantly to the legacy of women in leadership.

By Susan B. Hitchcock, Creator of the Age of SHEros
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