Barbara Vanyo, President
Robert Pattillo Properties

High Voltage Leadership

What would motivate a highly successful fifty-something-year-old entrepreneur who has always owned her own business in her hometown of Somerset, PA, to accept a corporate leadership position working for someone else in a city where she hardly knows anyone?

In Barbara Vanyo’s case – the answer may be hidden in her lifelong philosophy, “Leap before you look.” Barbara says this is what she’s always told her four children as they were growing up. And it was they, along with her husband, who encouraged her to “go for it” when Robert Pattillo offered her a job in Atlanta as head of operations for his company. Ms. Vanyo was already on the board of the Pattillo company, and even involved with the search committee, but she had no idea that it would be she who would ultimately fill the president’s position.

Fourth Generation Entrepreneur

The more you understand Barbara Vanyo’s background, the more her philosophy seems to fit. This is a woman who is a fourth generation Pennsylvania-bred female entrepreneur. Her great-grandmother and grandmother were in the oil business. Her grandmother also became the head dietician of a hospital despite having no formal training. Her mother started a business in miniature toy metal cars and later, with the help of Barbara’s father, manufactured hose nozzles and sprinklers.

“Looking back,” Barbara says, “my life was clearly influenced by the accomplishments of all of the women in my family even if I didn’t think much about it growing up.”

After finishing school in Somerset, Barbara left home for the first time to go to a woman’s college in her home state. But when she discovered that transferring to Florida State University would allow her to study art history in Italy, she took the leap. It was there she would hone her interest in art, especially interior design. “I loved every minute of my two years in Tuscany,” Barbara said, “and I even thought about living there!”

But after two years, she decided to return home, back to Somerset, and there she met Bob Vanyo – the man who has been her husband and partner now for over 26 years. Together they raised a family, three sons and a daughter. Courtney, Barbara’s daughter, has a masters degree in engineering and was recently hired by the Ford Motor Co. in Detroit. As a little girl, Courtney dreamed of becoming an astronaut and even spent time at NASA in pursuit of that dream. Courtney also made her mother very proud when in middle school, one of her teacher’s said something negative about working mothers, and Courtney vigorously defended her mom as both an outstanding career woman and a great mother. Barbara’s never forgotten that and hopes that Courtney and other young women will continue to believe that they can have some of it all.

Over the years, Barbara had her own design firm as well as a catering business. She also co-owned a high voltage wholesale electrical equipment and supply company with her husband. In 1999, they merged their company and formed a Texas corporation, Utiliserve. Barbara is a member of the board of directors, but left her management role to pursue new opportunities.

Serendipitously perhaps, Barbara met Robert Pattillo in a Harvard leadership program. They hit it off right away. He liked her background as an entrepreneur and wholesale distributor and invited her to join his company’s board of directors. As they say, the rest is history.
Mid-life Transition
Ms. Vanyo has only been in her new position about three months, but finds it and the company exciting. She is surrounded by a cadre of professionals. Robert Pattillo Properties is an Atlanta-based company that develops and builds major projects such as logistics facilities and large warehouses across the U.S. While Barbara is still learning about the company’s strengths and its operations, she is also getting used to working for somebody else – something she finds a bit strange. Nonetheless she’s quite confident in her own skills and in what she brings to the table. She’s also in a rather unique position relative to job security. She didn’t need the job, but she took it anyway because of the challenge and the opportunity it presented her at this stage of her life and career. Barbara now has a five year plan to make a difference at Pattillo.

On the subject of women’s leadership, Barbara has some very definite views. She said, “Women think about the future and are much better strategic thinkers that men. I also think we’re better problem solvers.” Not surprisingly, she’s already joined a TEC group in Atlanta where she and other executives meet to discuss and share non-competitive business strategies and help each other solve problems. “The mix of ideas is truly great,” she added.

Hometown Legacy
Since she’s been in her new job and new city such a short time, Barbara often refers to her previous life in her hometown of Somerset, Pennsylvania, a small, idyllic town of about 10,000. Unfortunately, it came to the forefront on September 11, 2001 because of the terrorists’ attack which resulted in the crash near there of one of the four hijacked planes.

But Barbara is very proud of Somerset and its recently revitalized downtown district. She’s particularly proud of the historic building she saved from being torn down in 1996, not even knowing what she would do with it. What she did was to restore it and open it up – along with an adjoining building – to a variety of tenants including her husband who now has his headquarters there. Interestingly, though not intentionally, Barbara said that almost all of the tenants in her restored building are women who have started their own small businesses. Talking about the “incubator-like environment,” she sounds like a mother hen talking about her brood. She’s also helped many of them by reviewing their business plans and sharing advice if they needed it. Along the way, Barbara’s commitment to saving and restoring this particular building earned her a prestigious award and began a kind of “Renaissance” of the downtown area of Somerset.

During her thirty plus years in business, Barbara has been recognized many times for her accomplishments as a designer and business owner. Among them, recognition as one of the “most influential women in business in Pennsylvania.” No doubt that Barbara’s “foremothers,” the three generations of women entrepreneurs in her family on whose shoulders she stands, are proud of her. No doubt also that Barbara looks forward with confidence and high expectations to the future - a future where the next generation of leaders, including her engineer daughter, Courtney, will stand on her shoulders and those of other women achievers.

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