



June 9, 2008

High-energy leader

NAWBO chapter gets creative spark

By Bill Wolfe

bwolfe@courier-journal.com

When the Tom Payette auto dealership sold out to Blue Grass Automotive in 2002, former general manager Maggie Payette Harlow found she was "not an ideal employee."

"I stayed with Blue Grass for a little while, but discovered that I am very hard to manage," said Harlow, daughter of the dealership's former owner.

As part of a family business, "my opinion mattered, and I had a lot of control over my environment. When I went to work for somebody, I figured out that you don't get that at every job. You do what you're told, and you don't ask a lot of questions. And I'm not real good at that."

In 2003, Harlow launched her own business, a Sign-A-Rama franchise that has quickly grown from a staff of three to 13, gathering prominent clients such as Humana, the Galt House hotel, Floyd Memorial and Sts. Mary & Elizabeth hospitals, and SeniorCare.

"Maggie is very high-energy, very creative," said Tricia Burke, owner of Office Environment Co. and Harlow's colleague in the Louisville chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners.

Now Harlow is heading into a two-year term as president of the NAWBO chapter, where she hopes to "take NAWBO and spread the brand a little bit more," connecting it to other organizations, providing more service to the community and growing its current membership list of about 105 to around 200.

NAWBO traditionally has been "a very insular organization in that the members are there for one another," but the group's leaders want to "open the doors a little bit," said Harlow, who credits Burke, the outgoing president, for laying "a lot of the groundwork for the work that I'm hoping to continue."

"What can NAWBO do for the greater good of the community and not just for our members? That's a big one for me," said Harlow, who will be inaugurated at NAWBO's meeting June 17. It will be held from 7:30 to 9 a.m. at the University Club on the University of Louisville's Belknap Campus.

Another goal for the group is a full-time executive director, "so that we have a consistent presence, someone who understands the vision and is doing the work involved in getting that going," she said.

In the past, membership has fluctuated year by year and president by president, Harlow said. Whenever leadership changed, "it was a continual process of recalibrating the organization and refocusing it." The goal for the future will be "consistency."

Harlow, 40, moved to Louisville with her family at age 11, so "I feel like a native," she said. She graduated from Atherton High School and earned her bachelor of fine arts at Indiana University, studying painting.

"I came home with my degree and had no clue what to do with it. My father, who I worked for pretty

much my whole life part-time at the car dealership, suggested I work for him."

Her art training comes into play at Sign-A-Rama, where her husband, Brian Harlow, has joined the business. Maggie Harlow brings the company a creative flair and "fun and funky" style, Burke said. "They still get high success ... but it's not always in a traditional way."

Harlow laughed when she heard that description, but acknowledged that "we do kind of go off the beaten path" with distinctive creations in which "the sign material itself tells a story."

A sign for Market on Market Street, for example, "combined hand-carved foam, sandblasted wood, cast bronze, wrought iron and hand-painting," she said. "We found a way to bring everything together. It's cohesive. It all looks right together, but it's all made of all different types of things."

In the same way, NAWBO brings together diverse women with different types and sizes of businesses, each working together to help the group as a whole succeed, she said. "What NAWBO gives you is the focus on really helping women promote their businesses."

"The sad fact is that even though women are opening businesses at a rate double that (at which) men are opening them, they're not achieving the level of success that they need ... to unlock more powerful positions in our business community."

Even with federal contracts, under which 5 percent of the business is supposed to go to businesses owned by women or minorities, "they have yet to break 3 percent," Harlow said. "There might be a perception that women are treated equally, but the truth bears out that we're not. We're not at the table as much as we should be."

With groups like NAWBO, she said, "we're learning how to be our own advocates and how to form political action committees and how to go to Congress and demand what is ours, our fair share."

Reporter Bill Wolfe can be reached at (502) 582-4248.
