

"Joslyn Lasseter: Party City Empress"

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By B. Lou Guckian

Long before Tennessean-turned-Texan Joslyn Lasseter owned San Antonio's expanding string of Party City stores, she knew she had an entrepreneurial spirit.

"At 12, I babysat," she says. "Even back then, I went the extra mile. When I put the children to bed, I'd clean house."

Lasseter comes by her work ethic honestly. Her mother was a single parent and schoolteacher.

"My mom told us you have to be able to take care of yourself," says Lasseter.

She has taken care of herself through a near-death auto accident, a divorce, single parenthood, a bout with cancer, major changes in Party City corporate management, the disastrous fiscal blow Hurricane Katrina exacted on her Houston stores and toe-to-toe competition with the giant likes of Wal-Mart, Target and Michael's. Some would plummet under such pressure, but Lasseter has not.

Her personality bubbles through with unmistakable spunk when she talks about overcoming tough odds and staying fixed on the future.

"When a decision is made and an obstacle occurs, you don't dwell on it. You move forward," she says.

Lasseter has followed her own advice. She has doggedly driven her Party City franchise from one store and 30 employees in one city to six stores and 300 employees in three cities; she has turned a fledgling startup into a \$16 million business in 10 years. She grins remembering a decade ago when Party City's numbered a paltry 20-something nationwide against today's 650.

To say it wasn't easy at first is the quintessential understatement. Admittedly and gratefully, Lasseter had help. She cannot say enough about the impact her employees have had on the growth of her stores. They are the linchpins of Lasseter's success.

Her former husband, Don Lasseter Jr., was from the start and remains today her business partner. The pair's daughters, Jordon, 9, and Morgan, 12, work alongside Lasseter stocking shelves and learning the retail business from the basics.

Lasseter's former father-in-law, Don Lasseter Sr., was her mentor. He gave his then-daughter-in-law her first real taste of Party City in 1992 when he hired her and his son to open and manage two stores in Houston along with a pilot Halloween Costume Warehouse in San Antonio. All three were phenomenal successes.

"I always knew I wanted to have my own business, and working for Don Sr. gave me the retail experience I craved," she says.

Lasseter owns three Party City stores in San Antonio, two in Houston and one in Laredo. Across all six, Halloween is hands-down the highest income generator, bringing in nearly one-third of the franchise's annual sales.

She still visits each of her locations regularly, still stocks the shelves and still greets her customers, wearing the same Party City T-shirt and black slacks as her staff.

What she enjoys most are the small surprises she's famous for.

"I bring in snacks or flowers or buy my employees lunch," she says. "We wouldn't be who we are without their hard work. I can never forget they are the ones putting their hearts into these stores every day."

Party City was not Lasseter's first career choice. At 20, she was studying nursing at Michigan State University when she suffered a near-fatal car crash.

"Until that moment, I had loved science and felt drawn to the medical field. But I changed my mind," she says.

Lasseter left Michigan State for the University of Memphis to study business and attained her Bachelor's of Science degree in Business and Marketing in 1986. She excelled in academics, was student-body vice president of the American Marketing Association and led numerous clubs.

Following graduation, she headed to Alabama to work in sales for General Mills and quickly rose into management. Her sales experience and nursing academics landed her in medical sales with Ethicon, a Johnson & Johnson company.

It was while in this role that Lasseter began managing Party City stores for her father-in-law on the weekends.

Whatever life has thrown her way, Lasseter has grabbed on, held tight and kept at it.

"I only get stronger," she says. Her mantra is, "If you have a dream, believe in yourself, and you will achieve your goals."

Speaking of goals, she says, "Our number-one goal is to continue to open stores that provide unmatched customer service and assortment of party supplies anywhere! In fact, we plan to open three more stores in San Antonio."

The key to being successful, she asserts, is to stay focused on goals and make the necessary changes to stay competitive, to offer the best prices and to keep the shelves well-stocked.

On a personal level, Lasseter professes strong feelings about giving other people hope, a feeling and belief she puts into practice every day in multiple ways. She is especially empathic of other divorced couples with children.

"Children are highly influenced by how their divorced moms and dads behave toward each other," says Lasseter, who got involved with the San Antonio Kids Exchange that teaches healthy parental behavior for that very reason.

To anyone willing to strive for a bit more balance in the midst of toppling odds and multiple roles, she is again full of encouragement.

"We work so hard sometimes without balance, but life is short," she says. "Enjoy your children, go on a date with your spouse and spend time outside appreciating nature."

Her Party City locations rank within the top 15 percent in sales among the nation's 650 stores. But Lasseter says demonstrating compassion is the most important achievement of all - for her employees, family, friends, customers and the community.

The Party City empress plans to relinquish the helm to her daughters someday, but never aspires to retire.

"Work is in my nature and always will be," she says. "It's true, I am successful, but working in my stores keeps me grounded. We should always remember our roots."

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