

La Grande Exécutive: Maura Donahue

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | March 31, 2008 | 0



Maura Donahue

Maura Donahue is a woman. But that's not important.

"I'm in construction but I happen to be a woman who's in construction," said Donahue, the 56-year-old vice president of business development at DonahueFavret Contractors Inc. "I'm chairman of the board of the U.S. Chamber and I happen to be a female."

She's not an in-your-face feminist, either.

"That is not who I am. I think that my gender is such a minor part of who I am in all other aspects of my life. Don't pay attention to sex, age or color — that's not who you are."

Donahue started with the Mandeville-based construction company in 1980 as a receptionist after having worked with Xerox Corp. on the South Shore for 10 years. After tiring of traveling back and forth across the lake and dealing with a shortage of day care facilities on the North Shore for her three children prompted her to move north.

She latched on at Jack Donahue Contractors, a small firm with about four employees and about \$1 million in annual volume.

"I just came on at the right time, as the company was starting to grow and things were starting to happen on the North Shore," she said. "It was just a steady growth since then."

Donahue started as a project manager's assistant, then moved on to project manager, then to office manager before taking over as vice president of business development in 1984, one year after becoming a partner with the company.

Wendy Beaver, a project engineer who's been with the company for six years, said Donahue's contacts and community involvement make her an invaluable asset.

"She has worked herself up from project manager and now she's vice president," Beaver said. "She has a big role and obviously has had a huge impact (on the company's success)."

Four years later, she married Jack Donahue.

"She worked hard to get where she is," said Lacey Toledano, CEO of the St. Tammany West Chamber of Commerce. "She began developing her leadership skills as a soccer coach on her kid's team."

Donahue was familiar with the construction industry, having kept the books for a family-owned residential construction company years before, which was her initial foray into the construction

industry.

To get up to speed on the commercial end, she took construction and estimating courses.

"Construction is so exciting because it's different owners, different buildings, different architects every step of the way," she said. "There's a start to them and end to them. I loved the project management side end of the business and was in the field building projects as project manager for a number of years."

She now heads the administrative end of the business, which now pulls in about \$80 million a year, marketing company services to businesses moving and expanding in the area.

Donahue and her team made a commitment to stay post-Hurricane Katrina.

DonahueFavret, which specializes in construction for the retail, health care and hospitality industries, has not been pursuing work in other states.

"We're regional from Texas through Florida, but since the storm the largest concentration is here, though we do travel with the retailers that we build for, including Target, Lowe's, Best Buy, Circuit City, Wal-Mart and a recent contract with JC Penney's," she said. "There's no need to (travel). There's plenty right here."

DonahueFavret is working on the \$30-million conversion of the old American National Bank Building at 200 Carondelet St. into affordable housing.

Donahue's rise through the Chamber ranks started when she was asked to serve on the St. Tammany West Chamber of Commerce board of directors in 1994.

"I thought the Chamber opportunity was a networking opportunity, but it didn't take long to figure out the Chamber had a whole lot more power... serving as the voice of the business community," she said.

Three years later, she was asked to serve as chairwoman. At the same time, changes were brewing that would pave the way for Donahue to lead the U.S. Chamber.

Tom Donohue took over the U.S. Chamber in 1997 intent on increasing the size and diversity of the board. Each state was asked to assign a state director and Dan Juneau, president of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, said Donahue was the perfect fit.

"I said, 'Yeah, I have a great name for you, but don't ask her to serve if you don't want someone who's going to have a lot of ideas and a lot of energy,'" Juneau said. "She's got a tremendous amount of intelligence, is very committed to the free enterprise system and knows what helps and hurts a business."

Her business sense propelled Donahue through the ranks at the U.S. Chamber, where she eventually would represent about 26 million small companies nationwide.

Donahue started out on the U.S. Chamber's Small Business Council in 1998 and two years later became chairwoman. Over the next six years, she helped triple membership from fewer than 50 to about 150 members.

"If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it the whole way," Donahue said. "Then they asked me if I would serve as chairman of the board, the first female to do so. I thought, what an opportunity."

At her first meeting as chairwoman, a male member asked her if she knew where coffee was being served.

"He had no idea who I was, but his assumption was that because you're female, you're staff as opposed to a board member," she said. "I said, 'No, I don't,' and I stuck my hand out, shook his hand, introduced myself and said, 'Let's go find it and I'll have a cup of coffee with you.'"

"I decided before I left that room that I was going to shake every hand in this room. I'm not going to be intimidated."

Donahue said she was told, as the first female chairwoman, it was her duty to promote women's issues. But that wasn't her goal. She wanted to unify large and small businesses on issues such as education, work force development and health care.

"And quietly, being a female, I'd serve females," she said. "That has been such an invaluable stepping stone for me, being the first female. It caught a lot of attention, opened a lot of doors for me."

Tom Donohue, president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber, had no qualms about the appointment.

"We went 90-something years without a woman chairman. We didn't give a damn that she was a woman, but it was coincidentally nice that we were finally able to do it," Donohue said. "When the difficult challenges arise, legislative and financial, we wanted her in the room because she can talk about, make a decision and get on with the business. She can look a grizzly in the eye and smile."

Maura Donahue's time as chairwoman was important, he said, because she really understood the small-business mindset. She was instrumental in engaging the U.S. Chamber to serve small companies by lobbying Congress.

The most important point for Donahue, though, was the timing of her appointment — the year after Hurricane Katrina.

About two weeks after the storm, Donohue called her and offered her to take a sabbatical to take care of personal and work needs. She declined.

"We (Jack and I) decided this was divine providence. We decided it was just the right thing to do to continue. So I called him back and said, 'No, don't give me a

sabbatical. As a matter of fact, load my schedule up. Whatever we need to do, wherever I need to go, I want to be there.”

When he offered her the sabbatical she asked if he was crazy. “She said what a great platform to have to talk about economic development, to talk about jobs, to talk about the needs down there. She did it as a lady.”

The way she handled the situation set her apart, he said. Using her connections on the national level, Donahue focused the American business community on Katrina relief without attacking the government, Donohue said.

“She focused us on the tragedy and the economic destruction down there,” he said.

Being a woman was one of the biggest motivators for not stepping aside.

“Ten years down the road, if someone wanted to know who the first female chair of the Chamber was, and they say they don’t remember or she resigned for some reason, no one would remember it was Katrina. They would just remember the woman quit. And that just couldn’t be,” she said.

“My biggest accomplishment for women? I didn’t quit.”*

Copyright © 2020 New Orleans Publishing Group | 3350 Ridgelake Drive, Suite 281, Metairie, LA 70002 |
Phone: (504)834-9292 E-mail: mail@nopg.com

Work-life balance key to success

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | March 31, 2008 | 0



Grandchildren Brennan Ory, 10, Kelsey Donahue, 11, Sydney Lyle, 10 and Riley Donahue, 9, plays cards with their grandmother, Maura Donahue. (Photo by Frank Aymami)

Many people recommend against working with your spouse.

Maura Donahue doesn't find it a problem.

"Jack and I were friends before we got married and it's been a joy ever since," said Donahue, who married DonahueFavret Contractors co-owner Jack Donahue in 1988. "There are many days we don't even see each other."

Among her travels statewide with Blueprint Louisiana, the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry and DonahueFavret and nationwide with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Jack's state Senate schedule in Baton Rouge, finding time to spend with each other can be difficult.

"When I have a day without Maura, it's not a good day for me," Jack said. "We have a condo in Baton Rouge, and we try to meet there so we don't spend more than a night or two apart." Add six children — three from Jack's previous marriage and three from her previous marriage, something Maura calls the Brady Bunch — and 16 grandchildren and scheduling personal time becomes even more challenging.

"But you have to have a balance — work, family, friends, relationship with the Lord. We've worked together for 20-something years, but we keep at work what happens at work. It's over after 5 p.m.," she said.

Maura grew up Catholic, but during college and shortly thereafter "drifted away." When she and Jack married, however, they committed to become active in church and have been longtime members of Mary Queen of Peace in Mandeville.

"I'm a born-again Catholic," she said.

Balancing everything else is the time she spends at home with her family.

"We do slumber parties for the kids, which is always fun. We used to do them all together but it's gotten so big now that we can't do (them all at the same time). We'll roll out the sleeping bags, play Disney movies and order pizza and just cut up and have a wonderful time," she said.

She's not a big TV watcher, opting more for movies. But there are two shows Maura admitted watching.

"We were addicted to '24.' We'd wait until the end of the season, then buy the DVD and watch the episodes back to back."

She also is an American Idol fan.

"You need a lighthearted time," she said. "When you work and you deal with so much that's heavy on your heart and head, you need to laugh."

Donahue also enjoys cooking and popping the cork on a bottle of wine from their cellar. Borellos and Bordeauxs top her list of favorites.

"On a Sunday afternoon, our favorite thing to do is pull out a good recipe and go to the grocery store ... and just cook something wonderful that you don't eat every day," she said.



Political process engages Donahue

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | March 31, 2008 | 0

Mid-City native Maura Donahue's attraction to politics was born in high school when she served on the Sacred Heart of Jesus Student Council.

"It's always been in my blood," Donahue said.

Even though she's never run for public office, Donahue has long maintained a political presence through the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Blueprint Louisiana, which pushed a reform agenda during the last governor's election.

She's also married to state Sen. Jack Donahue, R-Mandeville, who was elected to the Legislature last year.

"Jack is senator and I'm 100 percent behind him," Donahue said. "The ability to change, or fix or to make better, to improve what you have, happens through the political process."

Term limits were Donahue's biggest concern during her husband's campaign, saying they can bring fresh blood and ideas into the state. Jack Donahue defeated term-limited state Rep. Pete Schneider, R-Slidell, in the race to replace term-limited state Sen. Tom Schedler, R-Mandeville.

"If we can encourage businesspeople to step to the plate, who have not been involved in politics, to go to Baton Rouge and be involved in that process, not because you're Democrat, not because you're Republican but because you understand the business community ... that's where our future lies," she said.

Donahue's Blueprint connections started in fall 2006 when she and Jimmy Maurin, Sterling Properties chairman, were asked to represent the North Shore on the program steering committee.

Bill Slaughter, president of Baton Rouge-based SSA Consultants, which provides management organization for Blueprint, said Donahue's was an active member of the steering committee ever since the board was created.

"She's been instrumental in connecting the dots around the state, and that had a lot to do with her involvement with the Chamber," Slaughter said. "Everybody knows Maura, she's got credibility. She tends to be known outside just the area where she lives."

Blueprint members continue to lobby for legislation in five areas: ethics reform, education, work force development, health care and transportation.

"You do one of two things. You throw your hands up, give up and walk away or you dig your heels in and role your sleeves up and tackle it. And that's the attitude. Hey, we're here. Let's fix it," she said. "We'll never have this chance again."

Will she ever run for public office?

"In a different time, I could certainly enjoy running for office and if I had to do it all over again, would I? I would certainly consider it because I thoroughly enjoy the political process in this country," Donahue said.

For now, her involvement with Blueprint Louisiana will suffice.

"I have the opportunity with Blueprint to be very involved in that process and I'm going to continue to be involved," she said. "Blueprint is political."*

Copyright © 2020 New Orleans Publishing Group | 3350 Ridgelake Drive, Suite 281, Metairie, LA 70002 |
Phone: (504)834-9292 E-mail: mail@nopg.com