



Entrepreneur, Author & Artist

Heather Becker

“Strive to balance passion with reality,” advises Heather Becker, CEO of The Chicago Conservation Center (CCC) and one of those lucky few who’s found a way to fuse her passion with her profession. Inspired and supported by her parents—entrepreneurs and artists in their own right—the now 40-year-old Texas native fostered a love and interest in the arts throughout her childhood, at the High School for Visual and Performing Arts, while studying painting and art history on scholarship at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, then at the International School of Art in Italy. While there, Heather discovered the field of art preservation and saw a way to work in the world she loved while supplementing her career as a young painter. She took her first job as a secretary at The CCC, one of the nation’s leading private art restoration and conservation laboratories, and just more than a decade later, purchased the company from its founding director. During that time she managed to author *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools* (Chronicle Books, \$45). Now, as CEO, Heather is working to continue the mission of The CCC to restore public art while staying true to her own artistic drive...

TELL US ABOUT YOUR CLIMB FROM SECRETARY TO CEO. I spent those first couple of years at The CCC learning about all the different aspects of the business and what each employee did. In 1989, I went to the founder and suggested a business development plan, which would take the company from a small Midwest organization to a national service one. And that’s when the founder said, ‘OK, I’ll give you one year and we’ll see what you can do!’

AND WHAT DID YOU DO? Within that time I increased the business 20 percent, and by 1992, was handling all business development for the company. Eventually, I moved to become vice president, then president. Then, in 2003, the founding director decided to retire and asked me if I wanted to purchase The CCC. But of course, I didn’t have the financial resources to do that on my own.

SO WHAT DID YOU DO? I talked to Marshall Field V and Norm Bobins [Heather’s friends and clients], and they both suggested that I apply for an SBA loan. I did and it was granted. So I bought the company and have been growing it, adding new services and developing it ever since.

DID ANYONE DOUBT YOUR ABILITY TO LEAD THE CCC? There are always those that

probably wondered. I did spend a lot of time building loyalty and developing the trust of clients and employees. It was also a really interesting process for me to decide the way in which to grow things, what kind of culture I was going to implement here.

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A ROLE MODEL? I try to be. As a child, art allowed me to find what I wanted my life to be about, and I’m sure that there are many other kids out there who may not be tied to math or science or history, but for some reason, the arts allow them to really blossom. So I try to help and inspire children as much as I can. I also try to help other women because I think that as a woman entrepreneur, I can be an inspiration for others to pursue their goals even if it’s tough. Because I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing if I hadn’t gone through those risky and challenging periods in order to get here.

YOUR RISKS CERTAINLY PAID OFF. After taking over, I retained 100 percent of employees, the company just about doubled, and in 2004, I had the honor of receiving the Small Business Person of the Year for the State of Illinois by the SBA. That was truly an honor, to see that a young woman entrepreneur could be rewarded for years of effort, work and for sticking to her instincts.

WHAT’S YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE?

Getting people to take a step back. People are so bogged down in the details today that they don’t look at the grander picture.

GREATEST REWARD? To be able to retain my personal self-spirit and function well, professionally and personally, that’s very rewarding.

AND IN YOUR FREE TIME? I do a tremendous amount of Ashtanga yoga. Also, I love to travel and spend time with my partner, Dr. Howard Kotler. Every other year we visit another country to do medical volunteer work, so that’s very important to me. And to continue my painting.

IT’S OUR AGELESS BEAUTY ISSUE. WHAT’S YOUR SECRET TO STAYING AGELESS? Stay true to your passion, feel good about who you are, eat well and exercise. It’s a matter of confidence, of maintaining clarity and flexibility within your day-to-day life. When you’re healthy and doing all of these things, you’re going to feel young and beautiful. ■

For more information visit
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