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Sharon Harper

BY JOE MARTIN | Phoenix Business Journal

It is a long road from a car-wash attendant to a leading innovator in commercial real estate.

For Sharon Harper, it was her journey.

From a small town in Minnesota, Harper grew up in a typical Midwest family setting. Her father owned a franchise of Philip 66 service stations, where she would later work, and her mother, a former World War II factory worker, stayed at home to take her of and her siblings.

"It's really where it started. There was great expectation to work hard to perform, to be involved in the community and in the family," Harper says. "I also just had the incredible desire to be engaged and involved all through grade school and high school, and later wanted to achieve in college as well."

The decision for college was a little bit of a tangent from the family path. In Minnesota, there was an all girls private school that her family had regularly attended in the past, but Harper decided to head west to Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., where she pursued a degree in journalism.

It was at Creighton that she met her future husband Oliver. The two ventured to Phoenix, where Dr. Harper was scheduled to finish his post-graduate training position, and the two haven't left since.

"The thought was to stay for a couple of years and then move to New York City, but we fell in love with Arizona and the people we met," she says.

The pinnacle of your career?
Being surrounded by the most talented, motivated and dedicated professionals in a company of which I have the honor of being CEO.

Before the two settled in the Valley to raise their family, they took a trip to East Africa to perform medical work in 1973.

"He (Oliver) trained me to do immunizations, we worked at hospitals and did medical safaris in the bush to villages," Harper says.

The couple traveled near the Uganda border and a hospital outside the city of Nairobi, Kenya. They remained there for a year, and when they returned to Phoenix, Harper's career kicked off.

"I wanted to get involved in real estate... I cofounded what is now called Plaza Cos., in 1982."

Plaza Cos. focuses its efforts in niche markets within commercial real estate, such as medical office development. Its senior living real estate, which has become a staple as of late for the 30-year-old company, started off as an R&D-type project, but developed into a blueprint for how other companies handle that niche nationwide.

"It has gone from a tiny company to one that enjoys a reputation on the national level," Harper says.

Today, along with running the growing real estate firm, Harper has fostered a reputation for charitable work across Phoenix and its surrounding cities. She is involved in a long list of charitable programs including various education and community betterment organizations.

"In one regard, I'm always working. I'm always thinking about relationships and the company, how people could fit together to make the company and community better."

Harper has a relentless effort to continue to remain involved in the community.

"We are very busy after 5 o'clock," Harper jokes. "Several days a week I'm at meetings and dinners. I want to be present where I can make a difference in the community."



TITLE: President and CEO

COMPANY: Plaza Cos.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in journalism, Creighton University

ACHIEVEMENTS: Honorary Commander, Luke Air Force Base

FAMILY: Husband, Dr. Oliver Harper; we raised four children plus our niece.

DEFINITION OF BUSINESS SUCCESS: Being a hero in the eyes of my family and business colleagues

HOW WERE YOU MENTORED? My parents were unbelievable role models.

MENTORING OTHERS: I love meeting with young professionals, business colleagues and Plaza team members to offer what I can for their business success.

FAVORITE HISTORIC LEADER AND WHY: Winston Churchill — I live by the standard he set: determination, resolve, focus and dependability.

GUILTY PLEASURE: Flowers — receiving them, growing them, enjoying them

FIRST JOB AS A KID: A cashier in one my father's endeavors, the first drive-through car wash in Mankato, Minn. — a very seasonal job

FANTASY JOB: Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland

PET PEEVE: Too much talking and not enough action

FAVORITE QUOTE OR MOVIE LINE: "Ride for the brand," from "Cowboy Ethics" by James Owen

DESCRIBE YOUR PERSONALITY IN A TWEET: All in for my family, my friends, my company, my colleagues and my country. I am positive, committed, focused and never quit.