



Meg Sternberg

Leaving
a lasting
Legacy

By Lynne Brandon
Photos by Chris Fletcher

The small office is a sanctuary for the busy lady who is entering a new phase of life after a long and distinguished career in health care. It is a place where business still gets done but now it is on her terms and at her pace.

BIZlife spoke with Meg Sternberg about her career and her professional and personal trials and triumphs along the way. Here are her thoughts about making a difference in the world.

BIZlife: Even though you are not a native North Carolinian, you have called Greensboro home for many years. Where were you born and what was your childhood like?

Meg: I was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. Raised in a home of very modest means, I had to take advantage of a full-tuition scholarship to Clark College, a local two-year business school, rather than attend a university with broader opportunities. From an early age, I learned that we would often depend on United Way. Little did I know at the time that I would get involved in fundraising for it in later years.

BIZlife: Did you ever envision having such a successful career in the health care industry? How did you get into that field?

Meg: No. The truth is that I did not have a career vision at all. I just knew I had to work. I was supremely blessed to have people along the way who believed in me and perhaps saw things in me that I did not always see in myself and who offered opportunities. My career just evolved. I had been working in the field of organizational development at Blue Cross, Blue Shield of Maryland and

"I first met Meg in a meeting in Cleveland and I was talking about diversity. Meg not only understood the issues, but she was able to lead in an organized, precise and positive manner. She knew when to take action"

Congressman Louis Stokes

About her work with the Women's Studies program: "When Meg gets an idea she does something with it. She is a true 'go-getter.' "

Patricia Sullivan

UNC-Greensboro Chancellor

worked with Frank Mascia prior to moving to Greensboro in 1984 to marry my husband, Ben. In 1985, Frank moved to Greensboro to start Physicians Health Plan (PHP) and he asked me to join him.

BIZlife: John Lennon said that "life happens while we are busy making plans." I think you would agree that your life took an unexpected detour in 1975 when you got divorced. How did it impact your life, both personally and professionally?

Meg: I was a single parent for 10 years. I married young at 19, had a son two years later and then had a daughter. (The Sternberg family now includes two stepdaughters, three grandchildren and dog, Annie). Thirty years ago it was not popular to be divorced. It was very difficult for my children, and I had many moments of guilt. The guilt was the worst. I knew while I was on the road working to provide for them that I was also missing out on special times. I look back on it now and realize how very hard it really was, but at the time we just did what we had to do. As a result, we are all very close and I have two, strong, talented and successful adult children.

I learned that in spite of the challenges and the sacrifices, if I just worked hard enough, believed in something enough, and maintained a positive attitude, I could accomplish just about anything. If I could envision it, I could do it. As a result, I was always seeking the next challenge, the next horizon.

BIZlife: You have had your share of challenges but one of your toughest trials happened in May of 1986 when you were diagnosed with breast cancer. How did you and your husband, Ben, deal with it?

Meg: Ben has always allowed me to be who I am and he was my unwavering strength when I was diagnosed in the second year of our marriage with breast cancer. He said that we would deal with it together and move on. When fear would creep in he would tell me not to worry and that I would be fine. He was right and I am now a 20-year survivor.

Breast cancer was my sword of Damocles. It hung over my head but at least I knew what I was dealing with and you can deal with what you know. It became a philosophy of business and life for me. It might sound strange, but I am glad that I had cancer because now I prize and embrace every day. It changed my outlook on life.

BIZlife: You have had many accomplishments in your career. Can you tell about some that you are especially proud of?

Meg: Certainly a defining time was when I joined Frank Mascia at PHP in developing and launching the state's first physician-owned health plan. I often chide that we made ev-

cover story



ery mistake in the book and probably wrote some new ones.

At the time, PHP was only envisioned to be a Greensboro/Triad-wide organization, but we grew and expanded quickly as we were contacted by physicians from across the state about our model. A challenge and accomplishment all in one was the PHP recapitalization in 1987. We had to raise 4 million dollars and we did it. PHP, now United Health Care of the Carolinas, is one of North Carolina's greatest success stories.

Another exciting and defining time for me was in 1987 when Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger asked me to accept a three-year appointment to the Defense Advisory Commission on Women in the Services. It was a true honor and a humbling experience to meet and talk with thousands of women all over the world who are serving in our country's military. It was an exceptional op-

"She could take any problem, turn it inside out and create a strategy that moved forward furiously towards the outcome we needed."

*Brenda I. Canaday,
Director of Account Management
United Healthcare of the Carolinas*

"Meg was instrumental in the startup of PHP and in helping me to turn it around. She is a visionary, strategic; she was bullish with what we were doing. She would ask the hard questions of 'why not?'"

*Frank Mascia
former CEO and Chairman of
United Healthcare of the Carolinas*

portunity to advise the secretary on issues that have led to many changes in advancing the quality of life and career opportunities for women who choose to serve our country as their career commitment.

BIZlife: In your career, you have met many famous and influential people. Who were some of the people who left a lasting impression on you?

Meg: I have had the great fortune to have met many famous people. I like to think in terms of meeting great people and not famous people. They are great because of who they are and not just because of what they know or do. Some of the great people I have met are President Reagan, President George H. W. Bush, Sr., Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Justice Sandra Day-O'Connor and others. One of my most exciting honors was when I had the opportunity to meet and work with former Congressman Louis Stokes. He was the first African-American elected to congress, founded the Congressional black caucus and is one of the truly, fine human beings I have ever had the pleasure to know. When I stood in the room at his 80th birthday party, I knew I was in the presence of greatness.

BIZlife: This has been a defining and emotional year for you when you announced your retirement in July. What made you decide to retire from United Health Group?

Meg: My 20th anniversary earlier this year was the catalyst to my "retirement" at UHG. I slowly came to realize that I had been doing this for a third of my life and I asked, "Is this what I want to do for whatever time I have left?" The answer was "no" for several reasons. I loved my job and the many, wonderful colleagues at United, but I was traveling a great deal and


ROLEX



OYSTER PERPETUAL DAY-DATE
AND LADY-DATEJUST

CARLYLE & CO.

Friendly Center Four Seasons Hanes Mall

OFFICIAL ROLEX JEWELER

ROLEX  OYSTER PERPETUAL, DAY-DATE AND DATEJUST ARE TRADEMARKS.



“I had the feeling at a very young age that there was something important that I was supposed to accomplish but did not know what it was. I’m still looking for the answer.”

the demands were increasing. I had been longing to tap into my creative side; something that I had not been able to do as part of a large corporation. It just made sense to close that chapter of my life.

I don’t believe in retiring in the traditional sense. I am refocusing my energy toward new turns in my life journey.

BIZlife: What do you see in the Triad’s future, and what are the key initiatives that you think we should be concerned about as citizens?

Meg: Our two biggest concerns should be healthcare and education. We are one of the fastest growing states in the nation and we have a population that is aging. We all have a personal responsibility to take care of ourselves, to stay healthy

and to see our physicians regularly. We need a major turnaround in wellness behaviors and attitudes.

A strategic vision is needed to reinvent ourselves in a way that makes a place for everyone here. We have 128 languages spoken in our public schools, so we have a lot of diversity. We must embrace that diversity and the great value it can bring to our community. It takes a village, and Greensboro needs to become that village. We will need to think creatively in our increasingly global world or we are doomed to be only “responders.”

I am finishing my three year commitment to the United Way this year as the 2005 Chairman and my task has been to raise 13.1 million, 4.5 percent over last year’s goal. In light of disasters such as Hurricane

Katrina and others, we need these funds more than ever.

To grow you have to give. One in three people in our community depend on United Way agencies for survival. You never know when someone in your life is going to need help.

I know this is true because it used to be me.

FOOTNOTE: What’s next for Meg Sternberg? The list is long: decorating the new home she is building with husband Ben, anticipating the birth of a new grandchild and a very special birthday celebration in France. Did I mention that she is unveiling a creative, new venture in 2006? ■