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**Michele Morgan**

**The new chair of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance will guide one of the East County's most influential organizations in 2009.**

Author: *Anthony Gagliano; Sports Editor*

## Article Text:

The Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance began from humble beginnings—a simple invitation to an informal gathering of businesses to discuss how they could work together. The group had all of eight members in its first year.

"There was a lot of unknowns at that time," Michele Morgan says. "There was a lot of interest, and it certainly spoke to the desire of businesses in this area to collaborate and be unified if you will and have a torchbearer organization that will further their needs being met. Lakewood Ranch is very community-focused, and I think that's one thing that in the early days we were looking to connect."

MGA Insurance and its CEO, Lou Marinaccio, supported the organization financially during its first two years. The determination paid off, and despite the lagging economy, the alliance boomed in 2008, doubling its membership in one year from 175 to more than 350. The group took its first political stance in 2008, endorsing candidates who shared its vision of pro growth and pro development. Every local politician up for reelection sought out the alliance.

"This is beyond our vision," says Marinaccio, one of the alliance founders and its outgoing chair. "It is all attributed to the hard work of our current board and the members who promote us."

Sustaining that momentum through what promises to be a challenging economic year is what awaits Morgan when she succeeds Marinaccio as chair of the group this month. Morgan calls the task intimidating but is eager to tackle it.

"In a time where it's sometimes hard to find the positives, it really is one organization that I can say without a doubt that I go to and people are energized," Morgan says. "There's a very positive feeling out there within the organization, and I think that speaks to the momentum and the growth of it."

Morgan, 38, said the down times have forced members to look to each other for reassurance. Marinaccio

credited the alliance for creating a forum for local businesses, as well as members from surrounding counties that do business in Lakewood Ranch, to discuss their issues.

"It's a very positive alliance," Morgan said. "I think that's it. It's more than networking. It's more than socializing. It's more than education. It is an alliance. There's a common thread that everybody is in it for the good of everybody. I think it really has become a foundation for our business community here in Lakewood Ranch."

#### background

Morgan will oversee two large organizations during 2009. In addition to her tenure as the business alliance chair, Morgan is the campus president of **Keiser University**, which has 160 faculty and staff members and nearly 1,000 students. With Lakewood Ranch's unique positioning in two counties, Morgan sits on the chambers of commerce and the economic development councils for both Sarasota and Manatee.

After moving from Maine, where she graduated with a background in student services from the **University** of Maine, Morgan chose Florida's West Coast to be near Anna Maria Island, where her parents and grandparents vacationed for years. A fortuitous coincident landed her at **Keiser** 12 years ago, when it was a brand new school in the area.

"When I was looking for a job, I just kind of happened to be at a stoplight downtown, when we were located downtown, and saw a sign for **Keiser**," Morgan says. "I had actually just gone to Kinko's to make copies of my résumé when I was at that stoplight and I'm like, 'Ah, what the heck, let me drop my résumé off.'"

After five years as the school's dean of academics, Morgan ascended to her current role as president six years ago. She pushed for **Keiser's** Lakewood Ranch campus to implement its culinary program. In 2009, the school, one of **Keiser's** 14 campuses in a statewide system, will continue to meet the growing area employment needs in the healthcare and computer arenas. Morgan says most students choose **Keiser** based on its service to them, and she intends to keep the reviews positive.

"That is our ultimate report card," Morgan says. "Are employers happy with our graduates going out, and if so, are they sending people back to us? We are finding that happening, which I think is a good indication. Now, we don't want to rest on our laurels and think, 'OK, we've accomplished it.' You've never accomplished it. Now, the expectation is to maintain it."

#### clear vision

With new people in key positions under her, Morgan will focus on their development in 2009.

"I strongly believe that every organization takes on the complexion of its leader," Morgan says. "I'm a huge believer in that, so it keeps me in check when I start seeing things that might be going sideways."

The grounded Morgan doesn't appear likely to be making any wrong turns. She and her husband, Frank, who works for Sarasota Memorial Healthcare System, welcomed their first child, Brock, five months ago. The bubbly Morgan speaks with a relaxed air and an effervescent optimism. Morgan said becoming a mother made her a more efficient planner.

"I told someone the other day, 'You know I'm really glad I waited until I'm older (to have children)

because I'm just so much more patient now," Morgan says.

Don't mistake that charm for tolerance, though. As a leader, Morgan is demanding and driven. She holds ambitious goals for the alliance in spite of the trying times surrounding all businesses. Morgan wants to see membership grow another 50% in the coming year, targeting specific organizations to help the alliance maintain its balance and diversity. Marinaccio says he will continue his work with entrepreneurs and new businesses to help them develop business plans and get acclimated to the market in Lakewood Ranch. The alliance will continue to assist members in promoting their businesses, especially in online development.

Another program will be the continuation of the executive briefing series that 2010 chair Marc Simms started last year. Morgan credited the series' wide-ranging topics and dynamic keynote speakers with adding value to membership in the alliance, a key point for her.

"I like results," Morgan says. "I like to have a clear vision of where we're going. I think 2009 also will bring some added services for our membership, looking at where is the value in the membership and how can we promote that and how can we increase that."

The group has done well in Manatee, but Morgan wants more exposure in Sarasota. The economic woes mean more energy must be applied to solidifying and stabilizing Ranch businesses. Retailers, which got their own subcommittee last year, will have a larger voice in the upcoming year.

"The alliance, with the momentum it has right now, it's at such a critical point that we keep it moving forward that we don't get stagnant," Morgan says. "It's always been a thing for me that I don't want things to get stagnant. I don't really do well with mediocrity."

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Caption:  
Anthony Gagliano

As campus president, Michele Morgan brought a culinary school to **Keiser University**. In 2009, she'll add chair of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance to her plate.

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