Kathleen Munson: A Leading Voice for Lakeland

Polk County does not lack strong female leaders who have made it in what many still see as a man's world. Look around and you'll see college presidents Eileen Holden, Anne Kerr and Rebecca McDonnell; hospital presidents Elaine Thompson and Ann Barnhart; and bank vice presidents Katrina Lunsford, Stephanie Colon and Bonnie Parker. Others have climbed local ladders, tried to make a positive difference in their respective fields and persevered when needed.

But long before the women of today moved up, Kathleen Munson (Kathleen Sperry back then) moved into town and became the local chief of business in Lakeland. And we're glad she did.

Munson was 43 when she accepted the job as head of the chamber in 1992, following Sue Darden. She was the third executive vice president to be promoted to the top job in five years, a turnover rate that concerned executive board members. Had they only known then that she would serve more than 22 years before retiring last month at age 65.

She probably hates the "making it in a man's world" reference, given how she reacted when The Ledger wrote a story about her being one of three women to lead Lakeland's Kiwanis Club chapters. When that happened in 2000, she told reporter Cinnamon Bair: "Probably, that shouldn't be the focus. It should be that the clubs continue to have strong leadership. It's not a big deal."

That's Kathleen. When asked a question for this editorial, she said something along the lines of: Please, nothing more. Humble to the end. Never one to take credit if she could give it to someone else.

Even though Munson wasn't the first woman in her role at the chamber, she ranks among the best at leading the local group. When she became president, the chamber had far fewer than the 1,700 members it has today, making it the second-largest chamber in the Tampa Bay area. That's one of the truest testaments to the work Munson did in the past two decades.
In a farewell email to friends, Munson wrote: "For those of you who have ever visited me in my chamber office, you will be proud to know it is the cleanest it has ever been in 27 years." She smiled via emoticon. Then, a bit more seriously, added: "As I get ready to head out, I want to share how honored I have been to be a part of this amazing chamber and the group of leaders I've been privileged to work with. As I begin a new chapter in my life, I will carry with me so many memories of our time together and the meaningful work we've accomplished on behalf of our members and community."

That's Kathleen. A wit like no other. A smile that lets you know you are welcome. A business sense that matches George Jenkins'.

She's the kind of person who endears herself to everyone she meets, and quickly. Lakeland — the city as well as its businesses — benefited from her leadership.

"Kathleen has always held the relationship between the (chamber) and the city administration as a true collaboration, working together to move our community forward on so many levels," said Assistant City Manager Tony Delgado. "From business to education to enhancing our community’s lifestyle, she has helped lead the way through the chamber’s support. As the advocate and leading voice for our business community — and especially the small business community — she has worked tirelessly to guarantee that business can thrive and maintain success. She is a great partner."

And she’s also a mentor to the up-and-coming chamber presidents like Katie Worthington, president of the Winter Haven chamber.

"Kathleen has been a great supporter and mentor to me in my new role," Worthington said in an email. "From the moment the announcement was made, she reached out to provide insight into the chamber world. There are many hats to wear and situations to navigate through in this job, and I’ve only been here less than a year. Imagine decades! Her poise, her professionalism and her longevity with the chamber speak volumes to the respect she has earned and the impact she has made on the Lakeland and Polk County community."

If we asked others, they would weigh in, telling us one story or another of the impact Kathleen Munson has had on their lives, in our community. She was a leader when Lakeland businesses needed one, and many in the county are grateful for her presence. We will all miss her, but we take heart in knowing she’ll be in town, making us smile as she moves from her full-time job at the chamber to what we anticipate will be a full-time volunteer.

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