

# **A Wolfe in Leadership Clothing**

*Connect with: Diane Wolfe*

Born & raised in Kansas, Diane moved to Villa Farms, Palatka in 2022. “Oh Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore!” Her father worked for Dolly Madison, (where those Little Debbies come from, Shirley Dorsey!). He was transferred to Birmingham, Alabama at the same time that Rosa Parks sat down wherever she pleased on the bus. Seeing the controversy & conflicts coming, dad chose to lose his job

instead & settled in Council Grove, Kansas where Diane & her sister grew up. She graduated high school at aged 17 (apparently a smarty pants) & immediately married her high school boyfriend, Ken. Three years later, they began a family having two boys only 18 months apart. Ken became an architect & worked with a construction company in Junction City until his boss decided to retire, move to Montana, & invited Ken & Diane to come along. There were few architect jobs in the early 80's, plus they had always wanted to live in Montana,

so roots were dug up & Diane left Kansas for the first time. Once there, the “retired boss” asked Ken to open a log home building company together. This they did & promptly built a 4000 square foot log cabin on two acres in the forest for Ken, Diane & the two boys. Both Ken & Diane became active in the Jaycees during their log cabin years & Ken went on to become the National President of the Jaycees. (*The Jaycees, also known as the Junior Chamber International (JCI USA), is a nonprofit organization that helps young*

*people develop leadership skills and participate in civic engagement.*) Due to this new role, they said goodbye to the log cabin & Montana to move to Tulsa, Oklahoma. At this point in my conversation with Diane, she says (out of the blue), “We were there for five years & then got divorced. As soon as Ken heard Danny Thomas had died, he divorced me.”

“Wait, wait”, I said, “back up, back up. Explain this. Did you know Danny Thomas?” It seems during the Tulsa days, Diane began a very impressive

career in I guess you would say, “civil engagement”. She worked for the US Jaycees, became director of programming & worked directly with St. Jude (*St.Jude.org*). As a part of this position, she was sent to Japan to do trainings & fundraising presentations. She returned from that trip with a MILLION DOLLAR donation from Japan to St. Jude. This is how she became close with Danny Thomas. Danny even introduced Diane to Marlo Thomas as “Marlo’s other sister”. (An aside: I interrupted again to tell Diane how much

I wanted to BE Marlo Thomas, “That Girl”. I wore my hair just right, clothes just right & spent hours in front of the mirror practicing her voice & expressions!) As a result of this close relationship, Diane believed Danny would have been disappointed had Ken divorced her. It happened the day after Danny passed.

Diane worked for five years with the US Jaycees overseeing all their programming: St. Jude’s, Muscular Dystrophy & many education-based programs. She traveled a lot & became

their meeting manager, planning all their National Conventions for up to 5000 people. She became the Coordinator for the Ten Outstanding Young Americans program (*The Ten Outstanding Young Americans (TOYA) program exists to recognize and honor ten Americans each year who exemplify the best attributes of the nation's young people, aged 18 through 40.*) She “met many famous people”. After the five years there & the divorce, the boys wanted to go back to Montana. Although this

meant leaving a stellar career, she too was ready to return to Montana.

Back in Montana with two teenage boys, she used her impressive resume to get hired as the Convention & Visitors Bureau Manager for the Missoula Chamber of Commerce. Here she coordinated tourism for Missoula for several years. I complimented her fearlessness in job hunting, citing impressive self-confidence. She attributes it to getting educated on the job with the Jaycees. She had traveled all over the country doing training,



setting up meetings with the healthy American business leaders like Arnold Schwarzenegger (she “met many famous people”). In time, her sons grew up, left home & Diane reached a restless point saying she no longer had family in Montana & was ready for a change. She was President of the Northwest Chamber Leaders Association at the time when a colleague from Oregon suggested she take over the job she was leaving. Diane headed to Oregon, taking over as Director of the Boardman Chamber of

Commerce for eight years. Then, as often happens, life came full circle. The job of Chamber Executive Director opened in her hometown of Council Grove, & Diane headed back home. She finished her career there, totaling about 35 years in working for Chambers.

Curious about her son's lives, I asked. Son, Kevin was into construction initially to later go into teaching. The younger son, Darren, got a degree in Geography. He worked in Philly for a while, to find he was not a "city boy". From there, he got a job on a research

ship in the Bering Sea, mapping the bottom of the ocean floor! There is a use of a geography degree I had not envisioned! He then got a Captain's License to captain the big ships in the Bering Sea. (*Water surface temperatures average from 34°- 41° with snow common even in the summer when maximum temperatures are only 68°.*) When that got old (cold?), Darren took a job climbing to the top of wind towers to repair them! From the bottom of the ocean to the top of wind towers.

I'd say he got Diane's fearless job searching skills!

Finally, we got around to how she wound up in Palatka. In Kansas, Diane was talked into selling her home by a man who needed the handicap amenities it offered for his wife with MS. Her sister, who lives in St. Augustine where Diane had visited many times, encouraged her to come south. Since Diane was momentarily homeless, she headed to Florida to vacation with sister & begin a home search. She says St. A was too expensive & too big for her.

Taylor Douglas, a previous sheriff, now realtor, showed her the only house for sale in Villa Farms. It was affordable, safe to walk her dog at 11 PM, had community amenities – SOLD. She joined the Women’s Club to meet people & “to get things done”, met Carol White who convinced her to join Pilot as well. She also volunteers a day a week at the Palatka Visitors Center. Diane says, “If something doesn’t get me out of the house, I won’t go... I could be a hermit very easily. I need to be busy.” Yet, she doesn’t hesitate to be in charge – kind of

a contradiction. She replied that she kind of has two distinct personalities. “Or two gears,” I replied, “neutral & overdrive”! On that note, not only did she join Pilot, she immediately accepted the role of future president!

Based on the job history I gleaned from this chat, I could see Diane is a gal that sees a need, jumps in to tackle it with vigor & expertise. She then knows when she has done the job & heads off fearlessly seeking a new arena in which she can make a difference. Is she presidential material? Her resume

defines it! This had been the purpose of my selecting Diane to “get to know”.

We ended with a few more of the questions on my list. When asked what makes her most proud, she paused, smiled (yes, I could hear her smile over the phone) & said, “It would be that million dollar check I brought back from Japan!”

When asked what she has left to do, she declared, “Just take care of my puppy & enjoy the days.” Her puppy, a miniature daschund, is named Gizmo but is called The Mayor of Villa Farms, a

very active engaged character. (Hmm... where do you think he gets that?)

Does she have any generic advice to pass on? As a former motivational speaker, she replied, “Live each day to the fullest because you just don’t know what tomorrow will bring.”