

THE CHAMBER QUARTER



The chambers of commerce of St. Bernard, Orleans, Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes all face varying challenges, but their leadership is more alike than different, and frequently call on each other for guidance and support.

BY BETH D'ADDONO
PORTRAITS BY ADRIENNE DATTISTELLA

connections so they can start working together, gain new clients, new transactions. Whatever tools it takes to help our members navigate the issues of today, that's what we are here for." Staff members and volunteer ambassadors serve as event greeters at chamber events, making a point to personally welcome attendees and connect them to other members.

The return of in-person events has been enthusiastically welcomed, said Lindquist, 52, an Austin, Texas, native who came to Tulane University to earn a master's degree and never left.

"We've done 17 events since January, and 15 have been in person," she said. After 11 years as executive VP and COO at the New Orleans Chamber, Lindquist took over as CEO on January 1, 2022, when her predecessor, Ben Johnson, retired after leading since 2009.

So far, 2022 has been a year of milestones, as one significant program after another has returned to the chamber calendar. On Feb. 11, the first quarterly luncheon held by the chamber since 2020 drew more than 500 attendees to hear City Council members Helena Moreno and JP Morrell discuss issues affecting business owners throughout the city.

Bringing together women business leaders is a passion for Lindquist, who created the chamber's first Women's Leadership Conference in 2019. The second in-person version of the event sold out on March 18, with more than 550 attendees gathered at the Hyatt Regency New Orleans. Presented with sponsor Fidelity Bank P.O.W.E.R. (Potential of Women Entrepreneurs Realized), the conference brought 16 women's organizations together for networking and professional development.

"It was a fabulous day of women supporting women," said Lindquist. "We were able to celebrate our successes and talk about issues that we all have as women. We all have to be so 'on' all the time. This was a place where we could show up for each other and share our vulnerabilities and our strengths."

With an emphasis on collaboration, not competition, Lindquist said her goal is for the chamber to continue to stay relevant while impacting the community, not just in Orleans Parish but the region.

"We need to talk about the difficult issues that we're facing as a city and region," she said. "We need to be the consensus builders, to continue to build partnerships. Working with our businesses to help their development and growth is at the heart of what we do."

THE EXPERIENCED REALIST

After 31 years working for chambers of commerce — two in Baton Rouge, seven in Iberville and 22 in St. Tammany Parish — Lacey Osborne has learned not to let work issues keep her up at night.

"I've been around a long time," said the 65-year-old mother of two and grandmother of four. "At this point, I sleep well. I've learned to let things go. Prioritizing is a daily thing."

Although she considers herself a glass-is-half-full kind of person, Osborne said she's more of a realist than an optimist.

"I believe in working with what you have."

Osborne's job is very different than when she started 22 years ago in St. Tammany, which had two chambers,



Once two chambers — St. Tammany East and St. Tammany West — the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce, led by Lacey Osborne, now includes over 1,000 members.

one in the east and one in the west. After some management issues, the St. Tammany East Chamber dissolved in 2019.

"We are now one organization with 1,030 business member stakeholders," she said. When Slidell became part of the chamber, Osborne said she expected a three-to-five-year transition. That was before a global pandemic.

"We are still in recovery for sure," she said. "Our biggest challenges are finding and keeping employees, and that's across all sectors of business."

An inclusive manager who relies heavily on volunteer leadership, Osborne is focused on building bridges to breach the east/west divide.

"We opened an 1,800-square-foot office in the heart of Olde Towne and we're still working on connecting with all of the Slidell members," she said. While recruiting new members is ongoing, retention is also critical, and Osborne is proud of St. Tammany Chamber's 93% retention rate.

"Slidell has such a strong sense of place and community," she said. "But really all our parish communities do — from Abita Springs and Folsom to Lacombe and Covington. Connecting our businesses takes education and building trust."

Current challenges range from concerns over infrastructure and traffic to a series of contentious votes on sales tax options in the parish.

"Politics is not a dirty word, it's a reality and it's hard," she said.

Her immediate goals include continued outreach to build membership, growing staff to take the place of waning volunteers and ongoing education programs to help increase informed voter involvement.

When it comes to sometimes being the lone female voice in a room, she said she credits having four brothers with making things easier.

"It's not about being one of the guys," she said, "it's about knowing that I'm their equal. I haven't encountered too much pushback."

She said she remembers years ago, when she first started at the Iberville chamber, she went to a legislative meeting in Baton Rouge. "I came back to

the office and told my boss at the time, 'I was the only girl in the room.' He corrected me and said, 'Woman — you were the only woman in the room.'"

Just as she's been fortunate to have help and guidance in dealing with challenges, she said she's most proud of the chance she continues to have to help other organizations grow and deal with their own challenges.

"This job is really a calling," she said. "I feel very blessed."

THE JILL OF ALL TRADES

Ruth Lawson became the newest member of this group of female chamber leaders when she took over as head of the 850-member Jefferson Chamber of Commerce in December 2021. When a nationwide search was mounted for the position, she rose to the top of more than 100 applicants during what she described as a "vigorous" interviewing process.

Lawson, a resident of Gretna, brings a wide array of relevant skills and experience to her position. Most recently, she was executive director of the Jefferson Parish Finance Authority, where she managed an operating budget and portfolio of approximately \$20 million in investments, cash and securities. She is also intimately familiar with the challenges of running a business — along with her husband, Lawson owns and manages several Smoothie King franchises. A graduate of LSU Law School, Lawson has applied her legal skills as chief administrative officer for Jefferson Parish and as inhouse counsel for Barriere Construction Company in Harvey.

"I've enjoyed the government and public side, as well as being a part of the private sector," she said.

Like her fellow CEOs, Lawson is thrilled at the success at the return of in-person events, and proud that her organization safely held events last year, including the chamber's annual meeting, a meet and greet with legislators in Baton Rouge, and last May's Tour de Jefferson, which drew more than 600 cyclists. After two years of virtual, hybrid and modified events, the chamber returned to the home of the New Orleans Saints for its main fundraiser, the Black & Gold Gala, which was held at the Ochsner Sports Performance Center on April 8.

Lawson, 35, credits her legal training for a management style that is both analytical and direct, two qualities that she said serve her well when dealing with male counterparts.

"Women generally have a much different approach to leadership," she said. "Age and gender can present different challenges. I always try to communicate ideas and opinions succinctly, and I think as women we can sometimes couch our views, come off as apologetic for taking a position. We can't hesitate to speak our minds and opinions in front of a group of men who may think differently than we do. Who knows? We might open their minds up to something new. It's all about self-confidence."

Although she's still settling in, Lawson said she's proud of what she's accomplished so far. One highlight has been taking a group of business and education leaders and council members to Nashville to meet with their counterparts in that city.

"We wanted to know about their best practices, what is helping their city to thrive." Listening to 36 speakers over the course of two-and-a-half days delivered a ton of real-world information that is already benefiting our members, she said. "We are looking to deepen the profiles of our various communities — places like Old Gretna and Kenner, to show off their potential, especially to a younger generation. Jefferson Parish is such a family-friendly community that also happens to be close to where a lot of people work."

Growing membership on the West Bank is another goal as the chamber celebrates its 25th year of being the voice for Jefferson Parish businesses. With its own political action committee, the chamber actively advocates for policies that benefit its businesses and communities.

"I really enjoy the political side of the job," said Lawson. "We have a great working relationship with the parish administration."

In her new role, she said regionalism is always on her mind.

"We need to approach issues within the business climate as a region. We have chamber round-table discussions to talk about what we're all facing — the similarities and the differences — and how to tackle the problems. Divide and conquer isn't always the answer." ■



Armed with a strong background in finance, business and law, Ruth Lawson became the Jefferson Chamber's new president in December 2021.