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By Wanda Kenton Smith

From her earliest years playing on boats at Wayzata Marine in Wayzata, Minn., to dusting, stocking shelves and handling administrative duties as a teen, to moving into key roles managing inventory and selling parts and accessories, Natalie Briggs Carlson was always immersed in her family's boating business.

After marriage, she relocated with her husband to Austin, Texas, and then came back to Minneapolis, spending 15 years in corporate communications, leadership and culture. She specialized in personal and team development, strategic direction, conflict management and culture change in the international oil and gas industries, as well as healthcare.

Natalie actively served on the boards of several key organizations in top leadership roles including president and board chair, respectively, before leaving the corporate world to raise her sons.

As the daughter of Gary and Darlene Briggs, the latter of whom the MRAA's Marine Woman of the Year is named after, Natalie has long been involved in the nomination and review committee activity for the MRAA Foundation's top award. MRAA Vice President Liz Walz, former executive director of the foundation, invited Natalie to take over the reins in 2019, a role which she accepted.

Today, Natalie is executive director and sole employee of the MRAA Foundation with responsibility for fundraising, marketing, website management, scholarships, plus managing the annual Darlene Briggs Marine Woman of the Year Award.

BI: Many know your mother's name – Darlene Briggs - and understand she was a trailblazer, but really know little about her and why the marine industry's highest honor for women is in her name. Could you share some of her key achievements?

NC: My mom was an incredibly humble person and would be quite shocked to have the award named after her. She was the daughter of a farmer, then later railroad man. After marrying my dad Gary, she moved to Brazil in 1962 and then to Chile for my dad's job with Pfizer. Due to political unrest, they moved back in 1965 and settled in Minnesota with Pillsbury. My dad and one of his co-workers decided to go into business and leave the corporate world behind. They started a small engine repair business in 1967, Wayzata Lake & Lawn, which was renamed Wayzata Marine in 1982.

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My mom began working for the business in the early 70's, first as a bookkeeper, and then in 1974, became the full-time co-owner. Her primary roles were that of a CFO and office manager. She eventually began to sell boats and was the first boat saleswoman in the state, which was eventually highlighted in a national news story.



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Darlene Briggs

in-house computerized inventory and accounting system, which my mom oversaw. She gained national notoriety due to her knowledge of the IBM computer. She was also the first woman board member to join the North Central Marine Association (NCMA). She was invited by Jerry Martin to serve on a panel about the computer system at the Boating Trades Association of Texas (BTAT). The MRAA saw her there and invited her to join their education committee which was exploring the Spader 20 Groups, of which she became a strong advocate.

Through her work in the 20 Groups, the computerized inventory management system, her work as a woman in sales, and her national networking, she became very well respected throughout the marine industry. She took tremendous satisfaction and pride in being co-owner of a financially thriving boat dealership.

Tragically, she died suddenly at age 49 on August 31, 1986, from hemorrhaging of a malignant brain tumor, which had just been diagnosed. The week she passed, my dad wrote this note to friends in the industry: "A memorial fund in Darlene's name is being established in an effort to further the woman's position in business, most specifically within our industry. She was a champion of that cause."

Some of the largest contributors to the memorial fund were women from BTAT, MRAA and Boating Industry. It was quickly determined the best way to use the memorial fund was to honor women in the industry with an award.

Interestingly, before the Darlene Briggs Marine Woman of the Year Award was established, the only national spotlight on women was a "secretary of the month" column in Boating Industry magazine, so this award was quite the leap forward.

BI: What were the key life lessons your mom taught you?

NC: My mom's core beliefs were "You reap what you sow" and "The Golden Rule" (do unto others as you would have others do unto you). She lived those rules at our dealership and in all her interactions with employees, customers, vendors and colleagues throughout the nation. I believe living her core beliefs is the main reason she was so successful in the marine world. She was known for her integrity and being politely forthright.

Beyond this, my mom taught me perseverance and fortitude. She taught me that a woman can be very successful and make a real difference in what was (at that time) very much a man's world. She taught me how to be strong when times are bad. And she taught me to have a deep belief in a loving God. She also taught me to be adventurous as she loved to travel!

BI: How many Darlene Briggs award recipients have there been... and what are the key characteristics and traits you seek in recognizing top women for this prestigious award?

NC: 2021 is the 35th anniversary of the Award! The application does a great job in highlighting what the nominating committee considers: experience, personal and professional growth, community and industry involvement, and commitment to growing women in the industry. Nominations and applications are due on August 2 this year. You can find the link at www.marineedfoundation.org/darlenebriggsaward.

I am humbled every year when I read the applications from the nominees. The marine industry is filled with women of strength, immense character, and incredible accomplishments. It is an honor to have this award named after my mom.

BI: What would you like people to know about the MRAA Foundation ... and what type of help or support is needed?

NC: The MRAA Foundation's sole purpose is to move the marine industry forward through scholarships. The Foundation only survives with the support of people and companies in the marine industry; we are 100% supported by industry donations.

The three most important ways people can support the Foundation are:

1. Apply and encourage others to apply for our three scholarships and the Darlene Briggs Marine Woman of the Year Award, which are all listed at marineedfoundation.org
2. Partner with the Foundation to support the scholarships

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nominees and winners alike have come from every facet of the industry: manufacturing, media, trade associations, dealerships, and more. Women play a critical role in every aspect of the industry.

BI: What advice do you have for young women or newcomers who aspire for a career in the marine industry?

NC: I reviewed the answer to this question from all the Darlene Briggs award applications over the last 10 years, and these are the top five things they shared, of which I concur:

1. Seek to learn and invest in yourself
2. Get involved in trade and business organizations
3. Network
4. Learn your business 365-degrees
5. Integrity and professionalism are key

BI: What's the last great book, webinar or professional educational boost you've enjoyed?

NC: When I was a teenager working at Wayzata Marine, my dad required employees (including my brothers and me) to come in early on Saturday mornings for training. We watched videos and listened to tapes from Zig Ziglar, Jim Rohn, Brian Tracy and more.

When I compare what I learned as a young teenager to all the books on my bookshelf - which is a full 25 years of business books including many of which I've taught - the ones I most value are still the classics. Any of these authors answer any current challenges: Napoleon Hill, Stephen Covey, Zig Ziglar, Jim Rohn, and Ken Blanchard.

BI: What's your life and business mantra?

NC: "Persevere by finding the way over, under, or around the roadblock," ... and "You choose your attitude."

BI: When you're not working, what do you do for fun and enjoyment?

NC: I love spending time with my husband and my sons who are 14 and 17. We're big into board games, watching movies and going for walks. I love to travel when I get the chance. And of course, in the summer, our favorite family time is spent on our boat.



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