



## Change magazine proudly salutes National Women's History Month and Colleen Barrett, President of SOUTHWEST AIRLINES



**COLLEEN BARRETT:  
SHE'S FEISTY, SHE'S FUN, SHE WORKS HARD  
AND CALLS HERSELF A SERVANT LEADER  
AND OH YES, SHE RUNS AN AIRLINE**

By Sue Mayfield-Geiger

With more than 3,000 flights a day to 62 cities in 32 states, Southwest Airlines is the third largest airline in the world as measured in number of passengers carried, and the largest with destinations exclusively in the United States. More than 31,000 employees see to it that 70.9 million passengers get the best customer service possible each year (2004 statistics). They just marked their 33<sup>rd</sup> year of profitability, maintain 441 Boeing 737 jets, and the average passenger airfare is about 93 bucks.

At the helm: Colleen Barrett, President. Divorced and at age 61, she is the only female president of a major airline on the planet. Named one of the 100 most powerful women in the world by *Forbes* magazine last July, her number 52 ranking beat out the likes of Diane Sawyer, Elizabeth Dole, and even Queen Elizabeth. But this small-town girl from Bellows Falls, Vermont does not necessarily like titles or contests or anything else that takes away from her one true calling in life: customer service.

Colleen's mother was her role model, and her upbringing instilled values that stuck. Loving the law, but lacking the money to go to law school, she did the next best thing: became a legal secretary and decided she would be the best damn legal secretary in the business. An early marriage, a move to San Antonio and landing a job working for a law firm opened that door. Colleen eventually went to work for attorney Herb Kelleher, a guy known for operating out of the box long before the term was ever coined. He had a client named Rollin King who had been cooking up the idea of starting an airline. It sounded pretty good.

It turned out to be one of the best ideas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although

Southwest Airlines was officially formed in 1967, it would take three and a half years to get off the ground due to lawsuits and administrative hearings. Southwest would also spend another 11 years fighting competitive airlines that kept dragging them into court. We all know who won.

Officially coming on board in 1978 as Corporate Secretary to the Board of Directors, Colleen Barrett has also served as Vice President-Administration, Executive Vice President-Customers, and was named President and COO in 2001. Today she serves as President and Corporate Secretary. In this capacity she oversees management, leadership and budget responsibilities of the Sr. VP-Marketing; Sr. VP-Corporate Communications; VP-People & Leadership Development; Sr. VP-Enterprise Spend Management; VP-Employee and Labor Relations; Director-Internal Audit; Director-Corporate Security; and the Executive Office Staff. She is a member of the Southwest Board of Directors, Executive Planning Committee and chairs numerous special teams, task forces and committees relating to internal and external Southwest customers. Colleen's business awards exceed two-dozen and her other board and civic affiliations are numerous.

But don't let the sophisticated vitae fool you. This unpretentious leader promotes casual dress at the office, sends cards to every single employee on his/her birthday and date of hire anniversary, and has carved out a primo customer service philosophy that works. She is animated, full of life, feisty, has a big heart, and proclaims, "If you have to work, make it fun!" A Woodstock survivor, cigarette smoker (she does not inhale – really) and a mesmerizing storyteller, there is only one way to introduce you to Colleen Barrett – in her own words:

**When you were a little girl, did you ever dream you would grow up to be one of the world's 100 most powerful women?**

*Absolutely not. I'm sure that none of my teachers, friends or family did either! The only thing I ever wanted to do – really – was be the best legal secretary there was. I was just fascinated by the law, but I had no money, so knew I could not go to law school. I decided to do the next best thing and take a legal secretarial course. I loved being a secretary; don't know why nobody wants to do it today; they don't even want the title. (She does not remember if she had to make the coffee, but said, "Hey, I make it now – I make it for everybody.")*

*I truly think I was born to serve – that is what I like to do. I like to solve problems. Tell me I can't do anything, and by God, I will kill myself trying. I love a challenge, and I do like to serve people's needs and interests. I love the team aspect of things; customer service is really my passion, so I couldn't really*



L to R: Vice-Chairman of the Board and CEO, Gary Kelly; President Colleen Barrett; Exec. Chairman of the Board, Herb Kelleher.

be in a better business, although I certainly knew nothing about the airline business initially.

**Let's talk about those early days when you were Herb's secretary.**

I was working for Herb in San Antonio. He never intended to run Southwest – it was his client. He was the co-founder, but from the standpoint of incorporating the company and helping raise the initial seed money. The other co-founder, Rollin King, was a client of Herb's. He came in to have Herb dissolve a small charter operation that he had – that's how their relationship started. Then they got the idea that Texas could support a small commuter carrier.

**You are the oldest of three siblings (two younger brothers); your mother was your role model and taught you to live by the Golden Rule. then, as a teenager, your house was totally destroyed by fire. Did that change the way you looked at things?**

Well, it did have a profound impact on me, and it taught me a lot about people. I was working at a paper company part-time, typing bills of lading for the truck drivers, big burly guys. The woman who had hired me was a strict, librarian type who lectured me not to interact with the drivers –not to talk to these dirty old men. Yet, one of the first things given to me after the fire was a winter coat, purchased by the truck drivers. I was so touched by that. If I had just listened to that woman, I would have never developed any kind of relationship with those caring men. All this taught me to form your own relationships with people and don't listen to what others say.

**So how did you get to Texas from Vermont?**

After high school, I got married, my husband went overseas while I was pregnant and he returned when our son was four months old. We were transferred to San Antonio, and I eventually went to work for the law firm.

**You have said that you were never afraid to take the initiative and often invited yourself to take on more and more. What motivated you to be like this?**

I think because my father was incredibly strict and quite a disciplinarian. He and my two brothers were very competitive, in every sense, especially sports. I have no athletic ability and could not do most of the things they did due to a severe depth perception problem. My father pushed them to be their best, but since I was not good at sports, the only thing he could push me on was grades.

**Where do you get your feelings of empowerment? Herb obviously had a lot of influence on empowering you because of the work values he taught you.**

Herb has a good spirit and core values and treated us all as a team. It was his behavior that taught me. We all did everything as a team. I don't remember



ever being afraid in any environment; I worked for several lawyers before I met Herb, and I always worked on anything that I thought would save my boss time, so I just did it.

**How are you and Herb alike and different?**

I am a completer/finisher; he is a visionary. I am a "list" person to the point where I drive him crazy. I will even write something down after I have already done it, just to be able to check it off. Plus, Herb does not know time – he could not tell you the day of the week right now if you asked him. But, we are both very competitive. By the way, he is still very active - does a lot of traveling. To say that he is retired is a big joke. (We could hear him laughing in the adjoining office.)

**So, in those early years during the formation of Southwest, when you were involved in the three and a half year delay getting into the air and the 11 years of lawsuits, did you ever think this thing was just going to fall apart?**

I never thought that we would not get off the ground. In all sincerity, what I did think was that we might not be too long in the air. The thing that kept us going was the arrogance of our competitors. Truthfully, I think that is what got Herb going. He didn't have much money back then, but he was a dreamer. He said he would finance everything out of his pocket, and do it for stock. So, we got into the air; had no money for advertising, but we were all over the news because we were feisty and different. If they had just let us be, we probably would have gone bankrupt in two years. But, they fought and they fought, and when two of them got indicted, I knew then we were going to make it.

Continued ...

Colleen Barrett with female pilots and a SW Boeing 737.



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Now, did I ever think we would be flying coast-to-coast and serving 32 states? Absolutely not!

**You were appointed President of Southwest just four months before the 9/11 attacks, yet you persevered, did not incur layoffs, and continued to make a profit. How were you able to do that?**

As tragic as that was for the nation, the truth of the matter is – in terms of what I was doing for Southwest at that time – that is what I do every day. I put out fires. I created our Customer Relations Dept. from scratch; I created the Business Continuation Plan in terms of it being a proactive Customer Service deliverer. I am Assistant Emergency Director of our crisis plan, so to me, it was a horrible situation, but just because of my new role, I was not unprepared, because I've spent 10 or 15 of my earlier years preparing all of those plans for crises. No matter what role I have played here, I have always had a customer service focus, whether it's internal or external.

I was sitting right here when I got the first notification, so I immediately activated our War Room. It was just a natural thing for me to do; this was not new for me, because fortunately I have been involved with all of the operational aspects of the airline.

**What do you say to the Southwest female employees to get them to recognize their own inner power?**

You know what, I'm not really into gender. I like to mentor and do that a lot and have had women come and ask me to mentor them, but have probably mentored as many guys as women. I've always tried to remember the things that Herb taught me. I really tend to talk to people more about individuality, taking the initiative, and excellent job performance.

**Do women make the same pay here as their male counterparts?**

Well, they damn well better! There's a bit of a difference here. When we started and we only had 200 people, 52% were female and that still stands. We have such a promote-from-within philosophy, and you will probably not

find this at any other airline or even another company. We have three women on our board of eleven people. That is unheard of for a Fortune 500 company. We have many women on our Executive Planning Committee, which is the highest group here in terms of empowerment, and we have a lot of female officers.

**Can you give me an example of Southwest female employees who have risen within the ranks?**

We have women here who are responsible for buying airplanes. Laura Wright is our CFO and she started as Treasurer. But Tammy Romo is VP of Investor Relations and she started as a financial analyst. Donna Conover took part of my last job and she started as a reservation agent. She has been here 28 years and has had 14 different jobs; she is our best example. We do offer our people the chance to jump around and decide where they want to be when they grow up. We don't throw people into slots, i.e., you've got a finance degree, so that's all you're going to do is finance. We don't do that.

**Do you still work 16-hour days?**

Yes, I do.

**Seven days a week?**

Yes, but I'm not really proud of that. It is self-induced and I swore last year I was going to get it down to six, but it didn't happen.

**What do you do in your down time, when you really want to do something just for Colleen?**

I take a bubble bath and listen to Whiskey River. Willie is my favorite singer. I ran into him when I first moved to Texas. Some friends took me to a honky-tonk in Luckenbach, Texas, and I fell in love with that voice. I've also been to Woodstock.

(At this point, I bow down to Colleen Barrett, because I missed Woodstock and have always regretted it!)

**You have called yourself a "servant leader." Most people don't think of empowerment as serving others, but you have proved that is one of the most powerful things you can do in your personal and business life. Can you explain your philosophy of "servant leader"?**

It means that you want to lead with a servant's heart. For years, Herb would say to the officers of Southwest that their job was to support the field – not the other way around, so you can't support them if you are not out there listening to them, watching them, hearing them. It's a way of life at Southwest – that is the only way I can describe it to you. We have rules and procedures for operational things, and we try to be as unbureaucratic as we can possibly be with 31,000 people in 62 locations. We try not to preach, but mold our employees into the Southwest way of life, and we've attempted to make that



Change Editor Sue Maryfield-Geiger,  
Sr. Dir. Public Relations Ed Stewart  
and Colleen Barrett.

very simple and break it down into three things: have the warrior spirit, lead with a servant's heart, and have a fun-loving attitude. We tell our employees that we are in the customer service business; we just happen to run an airline. We teach every group of new hires who their customer is. It is not necessarily the passenger.

You cannot survive in the Southwest family and do it well if you do not have a fun-loving attitude. We use the term "warrior spirit" in a very prideful way – just as you would if you were on a football team. We reward for that kind of behavior. We give all kinds of recognition and celebrate everything. (There are literally hundreds of framed photos all over the building of birthday parties, anniversary celebrations, holiday get-togethers and more.)

**So, with the servant leader attitude, you also have an "employee-first; customer-second" policy. Obviously with happy employees, you have happy customers.**

That's correct. And if you have happy customers who come back often enough, you have happy shareholders. So, the pyramid is not upside down, but to many people, it is. The customer does not always come first.

**Do you think women make better leaders than men?**

Yes. First of all there are more women than men who are servant leaders. Secondly, women are better at just being intuitive about things. Also, women are more truthful with each other. Most of us have been parents and know that you have to have some rules and you have to set out what the expectations are. My female officers are much more apt to call my bluff, much more apt to tell me like it is, much more apt to argue with me – we argue, we pound on the table, we even might use a cuss word now and then, but after we get it out of our systems, then we say, okay, this is what we're going to do and we go on. Then I watch some of my "fellow" peers tiptoe around, don't say what they really think, talk all around, upside-down, that the person on the other end of the table is not getting what they're saying at all. Well, that just drives me crazy! But in the end, if you talked to a thousand people who know me well, I don't think you would find one who would say they don't know where I stand on any given issue or that they don't know where I stand on their performance or things they need to improve on. I am bottom-line, straightforward; am not mean or malicious. I am very honest, very fair and I will say things as honestly and positively as I can, but will not tolerate poor performance when it can be better. One of my favorite quotes is: "When something could be better, good is not enough."

**Would you like to see a woman President?**

Yes – if the right person ran - I would have voted for the late Barbara Jordan if she had run.

**Have you ever thought about politics?**



No. I have been asked to serve on a few governmental agencies and I declined.

**As the only woman president of an airline, do you think you've set a precedent?**

I doubt it. It would only happen at Southwest. It's still pretty much a 'good ole boy' network in terms of the airline industry as a whole.

**Do you have heroes?**

Yes, but most are unknowns: a nun who taught me in grammar school who I loved, respected and admired; a male English teacher in high school had an incredible influence on me; a business law professor in college who I adored. Roy and Tim from GSD&M, our ad agency. Of course, Barbara Jordan - and Ann Richards is another one. Ann is down-to-earth, tell-it-like-it-is, no-BS, and just spit it out. I love that about her. Plus she is a great storyteller.

**Do you cry easily?**

No, I don't cry easily, but I am very sentimental.

**Since you work almost 24/7, do you get any kind of physical exercise?**

I swim sometimes and walk four days a week for one hour (at 5 a.m.).

**Do people recognize you when you're out in public?**

Yes, that was probably the most uncomfortable thing for me when I got the President title. I do not like the limelight. It's not because I am shy, obviously, it's because I never wanted it. I hate my picture taken; is just not who I am. The first time it happened outside my natural environment, it freaked me out. Strangers would look at me and call out my name! It doesn't bother me much anymore and people love Southwest so much, it makes you feel really good.

**i've heard that you do not do email?**

Right, I do not. I get a lot of them, but Vickie gets them and prints them off. Email is just not personal.

**Did you know that i read recently that a man in Madison, Wisconsin has your picture taped to the door of his young daughter's room for inspiration?**

No...No! Oh, that is so touching!

And as we wrapped up, that is the Colleen Barrett expression I will remember. One of sentiment, compassion, feeling and pride. Obviously moved beyond words that somewhere, some stranger admired her enough to want his daughter to be just like her when she grows up.

(Editor's Note: Ed and Vickie – You are truly the epitome of the kind of Southwest people Colleen talks about in this interview. Heartfelt thanks for pulling this together, and Colleen, you exceeded my expectations. PS. Woodstock lives!)