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Educating From Experience

Colette Young, wife of Dr Pepper Snapple Group, Inc. President and CEO, mentors other executive spouses.

BY GERRI MACK



PHOTO KEVIN O'RILEY

To outsiders, Colette Young's glamorous life may appear effortless. With three homes (including one in Springfield), leisure time on the golf course, international travel and an 18-year marriage to one of the top executives in the country, she is the quintessential have-it-all woman. But engage her in conversation, and you will discover that she didn't stumble into her circumstances. The success and harmony in her life have been sculpted by a combination of patience, smarts and unending motivation.

"You can eat this elephant one bite at a time," Young says with a laugh describing her life as a corporate wife. Her husband, Larry, is President and CEO of Dr Pepper Snapple Group, Inc. "So many spouses lose their identity when their partners work at a high level in a corporation. Their conversations fall a little flat."

Young readily speaks from first-hand knowledge. She has experienced the good and bad of multiple corporate moves in this country and abroad. There were long periods at home alone while her husband worked 16-hour days. "I spent one lonely birthday in Warsaw while Larry was traveling," she says. "I just decided we would create our own day when he returned."

It is that positive attitude that motivated Young to develop her business, ExecuMate, where she is a mentor and corporate speaker to executive spouses. It is a natural extension of what she has lived and learned for almost two decades. "There is a great need to teach these spouses how to handle their support position in a knowledgeable way and let go of the emotional part," she says.

"When we moved overseas, there was no cultural training available to help me adjust," Colette says. "To that end, one out of four corporate transfers are successful. The other three leave their positions and just go home because their families struggle with the move."

Interestingly, Young has her own successful career that she has been able to integrate into her life despite the various corporate moves. Trained as a classical pianist for 14 years, Young made the most of her time in Poland and taught choir to 60 schoolchildren at the American School in Warsaw. She graduated with a Master's degree in Secondary Music Education from Missouri State and taught choir at all levels locally. While in Poland, she toured extensively with the choir, and made a life for herself outside of the corporate shadow. "You

have to know yourself and make connections wherever you are living,” she says. “No one needs the responsibility of someone else’s happiness.”

After moving from Warsaw to Chicago and then Minneapolis, Young realized that it was equally important to reconnect with Larry on his downtime. “My job is to protect him on the weekends,” she says. Ten years ago, Young realized that in order to spend Saturdays with her husband, she needed to learn to play golf. “You need to find something that you enjoy doing together,” she says. Today she maintains a single-digit handicap after “working very hard” and she says she is often on the greens with the guys.

Approaching human resources departments at Fortune 500 companies and finishing a book on the subject of corporate spousal support keeps Young busy these days. And her message isn’t just for the female spouses of corporate executives either. Over the years, she has encountered husbands who are experiencing the same things as corporate wives. “Mr. Moms have the same needs and are going through the same emotions,” she says.

Young is positively bullish that corporations will acknowledge the need for an executive coach for their behind-the-scenes spouses. She knows they will understand her message that happy high-powered executives are more effective in their jobs—and that happiness starts in the home, not the office. Ultimately that leads to a corporate language anyone can understand—a healthy bottom line.