

BARBARA DRAKE:

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN FROM THE SECOND ROW



BARBARA DRAKE EASILY COULD BE OVERLOOKED. She is slight of stature, quiet, unassuming. She does not stand out in a crowd. Hers is the small face in the back of the room.

But her legacy in Jacksonville, and beyond, cannot be overlooked. She has broken barriers, built businesses and led organizations, mentored and coached others, and invested her wealth and wisdom deep in the community.

But more than that, Barbara's walk through life has been a daily demonstration of grace. She has shown others – men and women and, especially, lesbians – how to lead with their strengths and live with generosity and compassion, regardless of the circumstances.

"She is a really grounded person," said Cindy Watson, CEO of JASMYN, a nonprofit that serves LGBTQ young people. "She's got a great sense of humor; she's got a deep passion for people; and she's not pretentious at all."

"People do not know about her history with the companies that she's created and sold," said Nina Waters, president of The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida. "She's very understated. She's very humble and gracious but she also can get things done. I look at her like the velvet hammer. People just don't know."

"Her role is servant leadership," said Jacksonville historian Jim Crooks, who has been Drake's friend and neighbor for 30 years. "She is a wise person but largely invisible to the community. She is rarely out front, but she is making things happen from the second row."

THE STORY OF BARBARA RUSSELL DRAKE begins modestly in Evansville, Indiana, just over the border from Kentucky. "I was born in a very poor family," she said. "I remember when we got indoor plumbing – second grade. I remember being out there digging that trench that would go out to the septic tank."

Her parents were good people, the family loving. Her father worked in a factory and, on the side, picked up trash, then sorted it looking for items that the family could use or that he could sell. Barbara frequently accompanied him on these excursions.

But education was not a high priority for the Russell's. "My dad couldn't read or write. I'm sure he was dyslexic." She was not encouraged to study, and college was never a consideration. She once told an interviewer, "The only vision I ever had was I would marry and be a mother."

By the time she was in high school, however, she knew "that I wanted a different life than I had." An Air Force recruiter came to her high school and in 1963 she enlisted, knowing next to nothing about the military.

She learned quickly. She met and married her husband, James Drake, also in the Air Force, in 1965 and by 1966 was pregnant – and was discharged. "The day they found out I was pregnant I was discharged the next day, no thank you ma'am, no nothing." Under an order dating to 1951, pregnant women were not allowed in the military out of fear that they would neglect their children or their military duties or both.

Her son, David, was born with severe renal abnormalities requiring near constant care. Her husband was assigned to Eglin Air Force Base, east of Pensacola, and the young family moved there before James Drake headed out on a tour of duty in Vietnam. Barbara's parents moved down to help her care for young David while she worked as a keypunch operator: "If you want to commit suicide, get a job as a keypunch operator."

One day she realized that she could afford to go to college in nearby Fort Walton Beach, thanks to the GI bill and she enrolled. Drake earned her AA degree at a junior college in 1969, her BS in Management from the University of West Florida in 1970 and her MBA in 1972, also from the University of West Florida.

When the Air Force – and subsequently all branches of the military – lifted the prohibition on mothers serving in the mid-1970s, Drake returned to the Air Force as an officer, stationed at Eglin.

THOSE YEARS AT EGLIN were a time of reckoning for Drake.

She had wrestled with her sexuality and her faith throughout her teens and young adulthood. "When I was 19 and just in the Air Force, I went home and asked my pastor, who had been my pastor for many years and I really respected, to pray for me because I thought I might be a lesbian. He tried to cast the demons out of me."

Her mother, a conservative Christian, "prayed for me all the time."

Her marriage "wasn't a good marriage. I knew I was attracted to women, but I knew God would destroy me if I did that." When her husband returned from Vietnam, he was not faithful to their marriage; "there was a lot of [his] infidelity."

Meanwhile, she confronted new challenges in her work.

She was named a squadron commander, supervising 350 young women, many of whom came from troubled backgrounds and needed her guidance. And more than one was a lesbian. In fact, Drake inherited a legal case involving two women who were going to be discharged from the Air Force because they had had an affair. The Office of Special Investigations (OSI) was investigating the women involved in the case, as well as others.

“They [OSI] were always wanting women to come in for questioning,” she recalled. “They’d call them in to see if they’d ever been to this bar, who did you go with, all of this crap. And the next thing you know [those who were questioned] would be getting thrown out [of the Air Force].”

Drake decided to tackle the problem head on and met with the young man heading the OSI. She introduced herself and politely said, “I know we have a case pending. Can you tell me what the laws are and how this works and how you do the investigations, so I understand what needs to be done?”

He responded with great candor. “He said, ‘Well, we really get in a lot of women because they’ll talk about other people, they’ll name other people they go with. The men won’t tell you a thing. So, we go after the women.’”

He also noted that neither women nor men were required to answer any questions from OSI. “They could from the very beginning say, ‘I refuse to answer any questions,’” Drake recalled.

Armed with this information, Drake went back and advised her staff to tell the women under her command that they were not required to answer any questions posed by OSI, and that she personally stood ready to accompany them to any interviews and be their witness.

“We never had another woman get charged for those types of social issues,” she said.

“That was probably one of the really meaningful things that I have done,” Drake said as she recalled the experience. “I was scared to death. I had a sick child. I couldn’t afford to have my life disrupted. But I couldn’t destroy theirs, either.”

It was then, she said, that she really came to terms with her own sexuality.

“My husband was wanting a divorce and I gave it to him,” she said. “And that’s when I decided that I shouldn’t be hiding any more, either.”

SHE LEFT THE AIR FORCE in 1977 with the rank of captain, a wealth of experience and strong academic credentials. From an assortment of job offers, she chose one from Container Corp. of America, to serve as controller of a paper mill in Wabash, Indiana, one of the largest such mills in the country at the time.

Why that job? “It was in industry,” Drake said. “I love manufacturing, I love it. It was to be a controller trainee and I would be learning about business. All my life I wanted to be in business.”

She worked in every area of the mill, learning the operations – “I loved understanding how equipment works and everything goes together” -- and, when offered a promotion, she asked to be assigned to the company’s recycling division. The recycling division, though critical to the company’s overall operations, had a poor reputation, but in that poor reputation Drake saw opportunity.

Because of her success in both the functional and accounting aspects of the recycling division, Drake was promoted to regional controller for the company’s recycling plants in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Jacksonville. And when, in 1981, the recycling plant manager in Jacksonville was transferred to California, Drake took over as plant manager and moved with her then-teenaged son to Jacksonville.

“I was the first woman controller, [woman] regional controller, first [woman] general manager in that company,” she said.

Of her male colleagues she said, “some of them didn’t appreciate me, and that’s an understatement.” But, she said, “The results were obvious, and I didn’t try to sell myself.”

From there her career in recycling took flight.

She remained at Container Corp., later Smurfit Recycling, until 1988, when she left to found a commercial recycling business in Jacksonville. The new company expanded services and marketed and shipped recyclable products throughout the United States, Asia and South America. In 1991 it was bought by Southland Waste and, in 1996, the merged operations were sold to Republic Industries.



By 1998, she was co-owner, vice-president, secretary and treasurer for Main Recycling Co., Inc., based in Jacksonville, which bought, sold and brokered sales of scrap metal in Puerto Rico and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In 2006, her partner bought her out.

Drake thought of retiring, but the work was in her blood. In 2007, she established Barbara Drake Trading LLC, brokering paper, plastics, metals and aluminum cans domestically and internationally, a business she still operates today.

Throughout her working years, she said, she knew what she enjoyed, and she had a goal, but her strategic approach was very much day-to-day. “My master plan was one day at a time,” she said. “I always wanted to be an executive. And I was always thankful for the job I got because women didn’t get them.”

It is not lost on her that her career links back to those childhood trips with her father collecting trash.

“I was recycling when I was a little kid.”

THOUGH DRAKE WAS NOT HIDING her sexuality during those prime work years, she wasn’t really out, either.

While still stationed at Eglin, Drake had gone home to Evansville for a family reunion and gathering of friends. There, she reconnected with a woman from her childhood, Joyce DeVillez. “I was still denying that I was a lesbian at the time [but] I just really fell for her,” Drake said.



The two remained in touch, developed a relationship and, as DeVillez went through some difficult personal challenges, Drake helped care for her sons. Through Drake’s moves to Philadelphia and eventually Jacksonville, the relationship remained strong. In 1983, two years after Drake had moved to Jacksonville, DeVillez joined her. In 2013, they were married in Maryland.

“We had a whole group of lesbian friends [in Jacksonville], but I really wasn’t out,” she said.

“When we first moved down here, the younger, quieter young people that had something to lose had something called ‘Pot Luck.’ Everybody would bring a dish and their own drinks. And when it was at our house over on Edgewood [Avenue], we’d have a hundred young women there.”

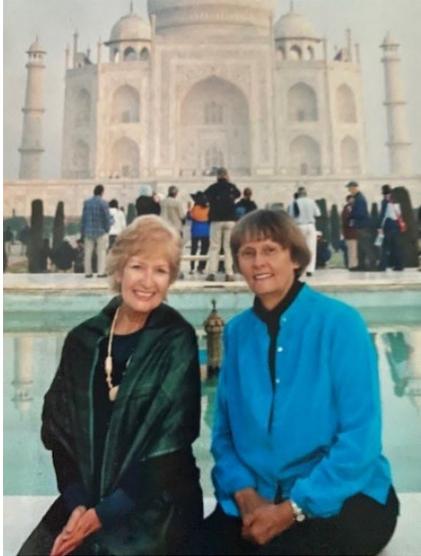
Her mother was in her 80s and living with her at the time. “All those young people would come in and hug her like she was their mom.

“That [Pot Luck] was probably the most out thing that I did,” Drake said. “It was a good group. Some were young and rough; some were in the closet and some had a lot to lose if they were found out.”

(“Pot Luck” still happens, Drake said. “Women get together every month; they’ve got their own online newsletter.”)

When she confronted prejudice in her workplace, she addressed it without waving her personal flag.

At the Jacksonville Container plant, “We had a woman-owned business that mowed the lawn at the company. One of the black guys said something nasty about the woman being a dyke and they told me. He was a good employee. I went out to the plant office and asked him to come



and talk to me. I said, ‘How would you feel if I called you the N word?’ He looked at me and said, ‘I wouldn’t like it.’ I said, ‘Neither do people who are lesbians or gay like it when you do that. There’s no difference. That’s who they are. That’s who you are. You’re a negro. That should not define you.’ We talked and he said, ‘I didn’t think about it that way.’”

As Drake’s career advanced, she focused more of her time on work and family. Her son grew to adulthood in Jacksonville and went to work for Drake; she made sure he – and all of her employees -- had the necessary health care resources. “We had my business bubble and then there was a lesbian community. But I never was out in my business life. Until I had my own business.”

Then she hired some women who were lesbians and was somewhat more open with them about her sexuality, but she remained low key. “When I was in my own business, I was working more hours and I was not doing that [social events] any more.... I didn’t have a lot of time to hang out.”

SHE DID, HOWEVER, FIND TIME for her community. In 1992, Eleanor Ashby and Dinah Kossoff, who ran Leadership Jacksonville, invited Drake to speak about recycling at one of the LJ learning days. It was a reflection of Drake’s status as a businesswoman in the community. When Drake subsequently expressed interest in participating in the LJ program, Kossoff nominated her, and Drake joined the class of 1992.

“LJ really changed my life and opened the whole community to me in a way nothing else had.”

Through LJ, she made some good friends, among them, Jim Crooks, Professor of History Emeritus at the University of North Florida. At the end of the year-long class, she joined the LJ board and eventually became its president.

A few years later, she met Connie Hodges, then the CEO of United Way of Northeast Florida, who urged Drake to become involved in United Way as a community volunteer. “She wrestled me to the ground,” Drake said, “and I went on the [United Way] committee to do the site visits for the nonprofits.”

To those site visits she brought her perspective as a business owner and her incredible facility with numbers – “because I know that you have to have certain things on that balance sheet and that income statement or you’re never going to make it.”

“Barbara and her brain for numbers is unbelievable,” said Hodges.

Drake was not always pleased with what she saw on the site visits. “I found a lot of nonprofits [where] I didn’t have a lot of respect for the balance sheet, and I don’t think that their CEOs understood that. I really wanted to see people that had some cash on hand that could survive and that had a serious program that really benefitted the community. Too many times I saw businesses that I didn’t really respect at all. I didn’t respect the leadership. I thought, ‘How could the board keep them?’ And I was candid when reporting back to United Way.

But rather than taking a punitive approach to poor performing organizations, Drake sought to shore them up, teach them what they needed to know and encourage them to get their house in order.

“I didn’t say let’s close them down,” she said. “I said these people need help to get on the right track and we tried to do that.”

Her work caught the attention of United Way leadership. “People were saying Barbara really understands how this all works and the numbers and the data... especially looking at the budgets,” Hodges recalled. “She could pick things up just like that. They were singing her praises.”

She soon became chair of the committee and then quickly moved up the United Way ladder to a seat on, and eventually chair of, the board of directors and from there to the trustees’ board.

“She loved it, and they [the directors and trustees] loved her,” Hodges said. “She spoke their language and they found out she was very good at what she did. She was on the trustees for years and years and years.”

Her community work was not limited to United Way. She served on the boards of Volunteer Jacksonville, Tree Hill Nature Preserve and Planned Parenthood of Northeast Florida, among others. She also served as interim director of the Mental Health Association and of Leadership Jacksonville.

Then one day, a newspaper article caught her eye.

SHORTLY BEFORE 2010, Wayne and Delores Barr Weaver, then owners of the NFL Jacksonville Jaguars, made a notable gift to JASMYN, the local nonprofit that supports gay, lesbian and transgender teens and young adults. Because of the nature of JASMYN’s work, the Weavers received some pushback from conservative factions in the community; some people threatened to turn in their season tickets to the Jaguars in protest. Delores Weaver, who by this time had become a philanthropic force in Jacksonville, stood up to the critics and defended her gift and JASMYN.

The dust-up received a due amount of media coverage, which caught Barbara Drake’s eye.

Though she was well connected in the lesbian community, she was unaware of JASMYN. But if Delores Barr Weaver was supporting the organization, she wanted to know more about it.

“I called [JASMYN] and asked to speak to Cindy [Watson, the CEO] and asked if I could come have a site visit,” Drake said. “I did the site visit, and I was just blown away at what they were doing. I sent them \$1,000.”

“She asked a lot of questions,” Watson said, recalling that first visit. “She was really interested in the mission and what we were doing.”

A short time later, Drake’s Leadership Jacksonville friend, Jim Crooks, hosted a fundraiser for JASMYN, which Drake attended. And the wheels started turning.

“I knew she was interested in JASMYN and had some affinity for the mission,” said Watson. “And I realized she knew a lot about finances, businesses and boards. I thought, “Maybe we could get Barbara Drake on our board.””



Crooks had joined the JASMYN board in 2011. He and Watson invited Drake to attend a board meeting, which she did; they subsequently invited her to join the board, and she accepted in 2013.

At the time, JASMYN was “in excellent shape,” Drake said. “Probably of all the nonprofits I have been on, Cindy understood the balance sheet, she understood the agency and she really wanted it to be secure. She knew how fragile a nonprofit was....

“They didn’t overspend. They had a good balance sheet. They were very serious about the financials. They had a good treasurer.”

But within two months, the treasurer became very ill, and Drake was asked to step into the role. “I’ve been the treasurer ever since.”

“For us it was transformational,” said Watson. “She had such a broad perspective, of the nonprofit sector, how you do things, how you safeguard your resources, how you really build it. We were very scrappy but she had a much more ‘You can do better than this’ perspective. She has been key to helping us transform our financial strength.”

United Way encouraged organizations to have a three-month operating reserve and Drake brought that value to JASMYN. “We started with a goal of one month,” she said, which at the

time amounted to \$150,000. “Now, it’s close to \$300,000 a month.” And they adopted a policy that 10% of all fundraiser income would go to the strategic reserve.

“The reason JASMYN came out of this pandemic in a strong financial position is because we had gone into it with some real thought,” said Watson. “We had already created a strategic operating reserve fund (thank you, Barbara) and had already thought we need to have this kind of cushion should there be some kind of upset in the economy. We had actually done some planning around preparation for a recession. So, when the pandemic hit, we just pulled that plan out and worked it.”

“We just tried to find ways to intentionally mandate that we do what we need to do,” Drake said. “I think it’s worked, and we’ve got really good financials.”

While working with finance was Drake’s strength, her heart was in JASMYN’s mission.

“She remembers being hungry as a child and that’s one of the things that attracts her to JASMYN,” said Watson. “Before Covid, she would bring a carload of food to JASMYN every week. She would go to Costco and do her weekly shopping and do shopping for kids and bring it here. Just really, really committed to people having basic needs.”

“I saw the need,” Drake said. “I saw those kids who were so damaged by the lives they were leading, and I just thought, ‘Somebody’s got to do it.’ And then I was introduced to the trans kids. And we see these young people and we know that what they are doing is going to make them scoffed at. So, it really spoke to me.”

BUT THERE WAS MORE TO HER RELATIONSHIP with JASMYN. When Barbara made that first visit to JASMYN, Watson said, “she was very closeted. People did not know she was a lesbian outside of this small community that she was a part of. I think she might have disclosed [to me] in a sort of code kind of way that she was a lesbian but it’s really not anyone’s personal place to come out for other people. So, no one knew she was a lesbian.”

The same year that Drake joined the JASMYN board, she and DeVillez were married in Maryland. And as Drake settled into her role with JASMYN, she gradually became more open about her status.

“She was not out to anyone [when she joined the board],” Watson said. “Right after she came on the JASMYN board, she started coming out. And that’s part of the JASMYN story because this organization gives people a cover and a platform to come out. Because you’re not alone, you’re not seen as odd; you are part of community [at JASMYN]. A lot of people have had this experience.”



“It’s easy to say, ‘I’m on the JASMYN board and, oh, by the way, this is my partner,’ and then to start living that more open life, which is very liberating and energizing and just builds the passion. It’s why so many adults who have been a part of our board are so passionate about it because their work here has been liberating for them while they are liberating others.”

In true Barbara Drake fashion, her coming out was understated and incremental.

“I remember when I told Connie Hodges,” Drake recalled. “I’d been on the [United Way] board for 10 years probably and we went to a party ... and [as they left] I said, ‘I want to tell you something. Joyce and I got married last week.’ And I had never told her I was a lesbian but I knew she knew, and she grabbed me and hugged me and that helped me realize that it wasn’t such an onerous thing.”

But her coming out was an important event, Watson said.

“In Jacksonville, the lesbian community has been closeted for a really long time. There are all these hidden networks. It’s really only in the last 10 years that some of that has surfaced. So, it was just huge for Barbara to decide that she was going to be out.”

Just as JASMYN brought intangible benefits to Drake, she brought intangible benefits to JASMYN. By virtue of her presence, JASMYN had a board member whose deep skills were transforming the organization’s finances, who had a sterling reputation among Jacksonville’s business elite, and who was comfortably open about her sexuality.

“I was a successful small business owner. I was a successful corporate executive. I’d been a successful officer in the military,” Drake said. “But I think I was known because of my work with United Way.”

Her presence and reputation helped to build bridges between JASMYN and the local business community. “The business acumen she brought to JASMYN helped change the trajectory of that organization,” said The Community Foundation’s Waters. “There’s no doubt.”

“She was the catalyst for [attracting strong board members] and those strong board members have confidence because the finances are shored up and Barbara has a command of it, and she’s been able to help build the capacity of the organization to the place where they [business leaders] would get on the board.”



WATERS AND DRAKE FIRST MET on a United Way site visit. It had been a rough series of site visits, Drake recalled. “The very last agency [that season] I did a site visit on was this little group in Arlington called Pace. Nina was there [then CEO of Pace]. It was the best site visit that I ever did. She knew every answer. She had the financials. They had the balance sheet. They had kids in there who had already graduated and come back. She really did a good job. I left thinking, ‘at least finally I come away with hope.’”

Waters, too remembers that first meeting.

“There weren’t as many women involved in that process as men, and I pretty much gravitated to her, and she was a successful woman and business owner and was all in. And she was an amazing volunteer and because of her background, the business background and the financial background, she was a huge asset in reviewing the financial documents and digging down into the health of an organization. And what I really liked about her then and now, she’s willing to understand what the challenges are but she’s also willing to stay with you to find opportunities.”

Over time, their paths continued to cross. Waters became CEO at The Community Foundation and Drake became involved with the Women’s Giving Alliance, a giving circle of the Foundation, and later the Foundation’s LGBTQ Community Fund.

“The Community Foundation has been an eye opener for me as far as philanthropy – how to give,” Drake said. “I was raised that 10% was what you’re supposed to do but I have had successful businesses and sold them and have a nest egg. ... I look at my net worth and say I’ve got more than enough to live the rest of my life. I don’t like to pay taxes that I don’t have to pay, and I have a pretty decent IRA and I give every bit of that I can to the nonprofit world. Nina helped me understand that and how to do that the best way.

“I think if you have assets – and they can be small – you need to learn how to use them in the best way. United Way, first, and then TCF really helped me understand a better way of giving.”

Drake was able to make a six-figure gift to JASMYN’s capital campaign “and that really made me feel good. I wouldn’t have done that if I hadn’t learned some things from Nina.”

But Drake’s philanthropy goes beyond financial giving, Waters said.

“Her money is important, don’t get me wrong,” Waters said, “but the other forms of capital that she brings to the table are critically important, especially for grass-roots nonprofits, because you’re trying to build a business -- because these *are* businesses; we’re all businesses. So, you get her business experience, which is gold. She brings other people to the table; she rolls up her sleeves and jumps into the finances and tries to see ‘how do we get us from being in the red to being in the black?’ That’s what Barbara does, and she sticks with it. She’s not a short-term volunteer; she’s a long-term volunteer for things that are important to her.



“Her philanthropy is so much more than money... she is a very savvy businesswoman and for those of us who are women in this work it’s nice to have a woman who can be a mentor and a thought partner and a friend and a confidant.”

AT AGE 77, BARBARA DRAKE’S LIFE is a bit quieter now. She and Joyce share a condominium overlooking the St. John’s River. (No surprise, Barbara is deeply involved in managing the building.)

“She’s beginning to realize her energy level is not what it used to be,” said Crooks, who lives a few floors below Barbara in the building.

She and Joyce travel, often with Crooks and his wife. “She’s got a good sense of humor – we laugh a lot -- but she’s not particularly humorous herself. She doesn’t make a fool of herself.”

She still operates Barbara Drake Trading; still rises early and gets on with her day. She has become an amateur genealogist, tracing the Russell and DeVillez families back to England.

“Barbara has a thirst for and love of knowledge and possesses a brilliant and curious mind that is always working,” said Connie Hodges, who has remained a close friend through the years.

Jacksonville, Drake said, has evolved “surprisingly better than I expected. Imperfectly, but...”

“I’m in a building with 23 other units. Buck Fowler is one of my neighbors; we work together every week on something; we are on the board. I’ve never said to him, ‘I’m a lesbian.’ He’s never

asked, but he knows. Jim Crooks has been like a brother to me. I would guess everybody in this building knows. They may not all know that Joyce and I are married but they all know, and I have not heard a negative thing.”

In December 2021, her son David passed away after a lifetime of health struggles.

“I thought I was prepared, but...” she said. Her grief has been profound. Over the winter she invested herself in cleaning out David’s Riverside residence, sharing his beloved treasures with his wide circle of friends.



As Drake reflects back on her life, she smiles at the connections between youth and adulthood. Her favorite childhood game was Venture -- “It was a business game, [players] acquire industries and companies and everything. That’s how I got started. That was my game.”

She also loved puzzles.

“I love learning. Everything intrigues me on how things fit together. I worked jigsaw puzzles when I was a kid. My life has been a little bit like that, putting puzzle pieces together.”

Embracing her sexuality and sharing that part of her life came slowly and gradually, but all in good time, she said. “I think [the question I finally asked myself] was, ‘who am I fooling?’” and she points to her own heart. “Why can’t I own up to who I am?”

She also acknowledges that the world has changed since she was young and speaking of homosexuality was largely taboo. As a young person she felt very alone, isolated, different and threatened. From those experiences she knows there is great solace and strength in declaring your presence for others.

“I realized it [being a lesbian] was more common than I thought. When you see the school statistics – now its 20% of the young people are saying yes, they are questioning [their sexuality].

“I’m not alone and the people who are out there that are [lesbians] need to know that other people are [out there]. And not knowing that is what hurt me.”

For more information about the LGBTQ Community Fund, go to www.lgbtqnefl.org