



Heather Kasten Brings Change to the Chamber

It took almost 100 years, but The Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce finally has a woman as president and CEO. **Heather Kasten** earned that distinction this year, and she raises her eyebrows a little when the milestone is mentioned. “Yes, 100 years,” she acknowledges. “The chamber turns 100 in 2020. I’ve heard from other women that this is a game-changer.”

Kasten is up to the challenge. She worked three jobs to put herself through college and spent the first 10 years of her working life in corporate America, first with commercial sales in hotels, then convention sales at theme parks and finally in pharmaceutical sales, often working 80-hour weeks. She helped her husband, entrepreneur and real estate investor Clint Kasten, with his ventures. Even when she decided to take five years off to raise their three children, she dove into volunteer work. “Vacuuming doesn’t bring me satisfaction,” she says. She spent so much time volunteering that her husband joked all she did was trade her full-time paid position for a full-time unpaid volunteer position.

As a businesswoman, Kasten understands the need to make payroll, keep employees happy and keep costs down—“the pain points,” she says. When she and her husband moved to Sarasota in 2010, her first job was the Sarasota Chamber’s vice president of memberships. Then she was tapped to head up the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance. In five years, she grew the alliance from fewer than 300 members to 700.

Today, at the Sarasota Chamber, she’s fixated on value. “I don’t want more business events and networking,” she says. Businesses want to know how to grow, want education, want to protect their assets, and find and retain skilled workers. They need resources, and Kasten wants to deliver and put the Sarasota Chamber in the national spotlight.

“Everything,” she says, “is going under the microscope. I don’t do a C-grade type of thing. It’s not about [asking for] money. This chamber has done a lot of asks. If you do something with intention and excellence, you don’t need to ask for money.”

Kasten says all of this with her trademark big smile and a reputation for openness, collaboration and compassion. But no one, she says, should ever confuse kindness with weakness. Colleagues say she’ll ask the tough questions to move the chamber forward. “I have the desire to do something worthy,” she says. —SUSAN BURNS