Heather Kasten

President/CEO of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance

Three visionaries founded the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance in 2005 to support the growing number of businesses in the region. Today, Heather Kasten is the President/CEO of the alliance with 600 member businesses that employ 2,500 business professionals. Despite its name, the alliance has members from St. Petersburg to Fort Myers who understand the potential business relationships available in the area.

When the groundbreaking of the 7,000-acre master-planned mixed-use Lakewood Ranch took place in 1994, few could imagine the scope of the development that is in both Sarasota and Manatee Counties. It was inevitable that the need for an organization to represent business interests would be recognized. Three visionaries founded the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance in 2005 to support the growing number of businesses in the region. Today, Heather Kasten is the President/CEO of the alliance with 600 member businesses that employ 2,500 business professionals. Despite its name, the alliance has members from St. Petersburg to Fort Myers who understand the potential business relationships available in the area.

"I connect people and businesses with each other. This is done digitally, but more importantly it's done by our 150 events per year with the intent of offering opportunities for businesses to connect with each other. Annually we conduct a member survey asking for topics and issues that are most relevant to their business. Depending on the goal of an event, there may be 20 to 400 people in attendance, since businesses have different needs. Some want to grow their business, so education on business disciplines is important, and some want to connect with residents, government leaders, and other business professionals. Smaller business owners like the monthly networking events while large business professionals favor luncheons and the monthly CEO-level meetings where topics are more regional such as when school district speakers were invited to discuss their respective levies on the recent ballot. Events are opportunities for people to meet face-to-face to form meaningful relationships. Our tag line is people buy from people they like and trust, and face-to-face get-togethers are the time to build relationships," Heather says.

Information from the alliance demonstrates the growth that Lakewood Ranch has experienced. It's the fourth best-selling master-planned community in the U.S. and includes green space, parks, schools, trails, and athletic facilities. Previously farmland, Lakewood Ranch is now home to residential and commercial properties with over 12,000 households (projected at 30,000 at build out) with 30,500 individuals. Home prices range from $200,000 to well over $1 million. Eighty percent of the residents are college educated. Professional/tech, finance/insurance, healthcare, construction, and retail enterprises dominate the 1,350 businesses that have 14,000 employees with the majority in the professional business category. The average household income is over $117,000 and the average age of residents is 45. Currently, significant projects for Lakewood Ranch are the 305-acre CORE project dedicated to health care and biotech businesses, the new Players Theatre Centre for Performing Arts, and the Waterside development in Sarasota County.

Maribeth Phillips, President & CEO of Meals on Wheels Plus of Manatee, says, "Heather Kasten is a highly respected, stand-out leader in the Sarasota-Manatee business community. Under Heather's leadership, the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance has propelled to a higher level of professional connections where programs, speakers, events, funding, and training have become meaningful resources for its member businesses. Heather is a visionary who has identified areas within the LWRBA where growth can only come by making strategic changes, such as adding a business development executive to her team, updating its website, and collaborating with other community organizations to broaden member benefits. Heather is a trusted colleague who makes herself available to her Board and to the LWRBA members whenever they need to bounce an idea or make a suggestion. Over the five years I've known Heather, her character and community-centric focus shines not only with her role in the LWRBA, but also with her volunteer work."

Since April 2014 Heather has been the face of the alliance after serving as Vice-President of Membership and Events at the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce. She credits two of the founding members—who continue to support the alliance—with their vision of being the organization that acts as a conduit between Sarasota and Manatee counties: Lou Marinaccio and Rex Jensen, president and CEO of Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, which is still a working farm with sod, citrus, and 1,800 head of cattle. The two have been partners and supporters who share resources since the inception of the alliance. The Board of Directors and nine committees are part of the 200 volunteers that help the alliance operate. She praises the five full-time staff who are each responsible for one leg of a five-legged stool.

She says, "The goal is to remain relevant so what we sponsor is important to our business members. We're always searching for new, creative, out-of-the-box, meaningful opportunities for networking. I enjoy helping people succeed and to be the best version of themselves. My reward from the long days and evening events is when a business professional tells me that, thanks to the alliance, the company landed its biggest account. A goal I would like to spend more time on is economic development—starting, growing, and attracting new businesses to Lakewood Ranch." The alliance is also committed to community engagement as members volunteer with 50 non-profits helping them with identified needs. The event on October 4 and 5 is part of the organization's mission to give back to the community.

With a Bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Iowa, a Master's degree in marketing from Webster University, and previous work experience at Eli Lilly and Company and Six Flags Theme Parks, Heather's advice to other professionals is to give credit to the entire team including board members and staff, staying humble, being grateful, and counting blessings. Keeping her awake at 3:00 a.m. is how to manage and balance time and focus on the important issues with the most impact. (Her teenage children are also in her middle-of-the-night thoughts.)

She serves on Visit Sarasota, CareerSource, and the Bradenton Area Economic Development Corporation Boards of Directors. She was raised in Bellville, Illinois. Her father was an engineer and her mother was a high school math teacher and department chair. Her brothers live in Indiana and Colorado. She and husband Clint Kasten, a real estate entrepreneur, have three children. Cole is a senior at University of Tampa, Crayton is a sophomore at Florida Gulf Coast University, and Carli is a junior at Lakewood Ranch High School. With her visible job, she prefers quiet time with the family boating, eating at new restaurants, and pleasure and business reading.

One of Heather's guiding principles is to promise only what you can deliver and deliver what you promised. By all accounts, she upholds this principle on a daily basis.

STORY: Carol Darling
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