



Emily Walsh

Publisher
Observer Media
Group

She had no intention of following in her parents' footsteps. Her father Matt and mother Lisa and Lisa's parents, David and Ruth Beliles, purchased the Longboat Observer in 1995 which led to the Observer Media Group with 10 newspapers, six websites, and two lifestyle magazines. Last fall Matt announced that Emily would become the Publisher of the East County Observer, Longboat Observer, Sarasota Observer, Siesta Observer, Season magazine, LWR Life magazine, and YourObserver.com.

"I'm passionate about the media industry. I want the company to be the best newspaper company in Florida. I want to make a difference industry-wide with the company being on the forefront of innovation and thriving in a changing environment. I am constantly learning about industry and market trends. As the fourth generation of the family in the newspaper business, I counter those who say print is dying."



Careers have a way of sneaking up on unsuspecting victims. Even when a child has no interest in joining the family-owned business, fate steps in. Despite hearing about the newspaper business every night at home, Emily Walsh had no intention of following her parents' footsteps. Her father Matt and mother Lisa and Lisa's parents, David and Ruth Beliles, purchased the Longboat Observer in 1995 which led to the Observer Media Group with 10 newspapers, six websites, and two lifestyle magazines. Last fall Matt Walsh announced that Emily would become the Publisher of the East County Observer, Longboat Observer, Sarasota Observer, Siesta Observer, Season magazine, LWR Life magazine, and YourObserver.com.

Emily says, "I'm passionate about the media industry. I want the company to be the best newspaper company in Florida. I want to make a difference industry-wide with the company being on the forefront of innovation and thriving in a changing environment. I am constantly learning about industry and market trends. As the fourth generation of the family in the newspaper business, I counter those who say print is dying. We bought our twelfth newspaper a month ago. The older population in Florida relies on newspapers. Our success is built on our niche: hyper-local news. We provide news for the readers in different areas of Sarasota and throughout Florida that are relevant to their lives. Last fall the company received 81 editorial awards, more than any company, in the Florida Press Association's Better Weekly Newspaper Contest."

Emily's career did not begin in the newspaper business, but rather in the performing arts where she was a ballerina with the Sarasota Ballet. Beginning ballet classes at age two, she attended the School of American Ballet and American Ballet Theatre in summers in St. Petersburg where the family lived. When she was 14, the Sarasota Ballet took over the youth ballet that coincided with the family's move to Sarasota where she and her sister Kate attended the Sarasota Ballet School. When Emily was in the tenth grade, Robert DeWarren, then artistic director of the Sarasota Ballet, offered Emily an apprenticeship where she spent one-half day at Booker High School and one-half day at the ballet. One year later, DeWarren offered her a fulltime position and she completed high school through the University of Nebraska, but at age 20, illness ended her ballet career. Still her plans were to go to New York City.

Emily left for Florida State University only to return to Sarasota one year later. She became the Observer's calendar guru and general "man on the street" until the photographer for a black tie event cancelled and—with no photography background—she was thrust into the gig. New York City was put on the back burner. For seven years she was the Black Tie and Arts and Entertainment Editor. From that experience, she realized two things: she knew layout and design, but needed experience in other areas and that the Observer needed to upgrade its digital presence. She worked in advertising sales to gain broader experience and then took over YourObserver.com. She also taught ballet to all ages at the Sarasota School of Ballet for seven years.

"Every week 70,000 read our newspapers and 40,000 visit the website. I spend time


on the news side, but feel my strengths are in the sales, marketing, circulation, and digital operations. I assure that the websites are working properly, that staff has the resources they need, that newspapers are delivered to the right places, and that we are writing about topics and events that are important to the readers. My excitement every day comes from the culture of our company. It is family owned and all 125 employees feel like they are part of a family. On the first Friday of every month, we videoconference with the sites all over Florida. Matt (whose first name I use at work) offers praise, announces milestones such as baby births and marriages, inspires, and has a Q and A time Ask the CEO. I am also proud of the number of women in leadership positions in our company. The actress Geena Davis said there is a major disparity in the number of women in leadership roles in print industry with 19 percent. Except for Chairman David Beliles and Editor/CEO Matt Walsh, the Vice President (my mother), CFO, Executive Editor, Director of Advertising, and Sales Managers are women."

Nancy Lane, President of Local Media Association (where Emily is Chair of the Foundation Board of Directors), says, "The local media industry needs more leaders like Emily Walsh. She has always been willing to embrace technology changes and take risks. As a result, the Observer Group is far ahead of many other community newspaper groups when it comes to the digital transition. She is innovative, entrepreneurial, and fearless. Her family's company is in very good hands with Emily at the helm."

Emily says, "The best advice I ever received came from several people. One of my ballet masters told us to leave our problems at home. My grandfather and father always told us to smile because it makes people wonder why you are smiling. And our parents—who are our greatest supporters—taught us the 'Golden Rule.' My advice to those who are hesitant to work toward what appears to be an unobtainable goal is to go for it. Believe in yourself. Stretch your goals. I had a stretched goal of being selected for Leadership Florida and I achieved that stretched goal."

Emily's commitment to the community is evident by her fundraising and service on many non-profit boards such as SPARCC (where her mother, Lisa, also served), Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Ringling Library Association Board of Directors (where she is Town Hall Chair 2018), and regional director of Leadership Florida.

In November Emily was awarded the American Jewish Committee's 2016 Civic Achievement Award for her business and community leadership. Emily's sister, Kate Honea, is one of eight principal dancers at the Sarasota Ballet and her brother Brian is a Captain in the U.S. Marines. The joy of her life is her son, Rhys Parry, who attends Southside Elementary School. Spending time with her son at the beach and reading are Emily's favorite leisure activities.

Emily's work ethic of being passionate about what you do in your professional and personal lives, always learning about your business and your community, and sharing your talents with non-profit organizations serves as a role model not just for women, but for all of us. 

 STORY: Carol Darling

 IMAGES: Evelyn England