

# SHE *is* A POWERHOUSE

ANNE CONNER OF TOWNEBANK BRINGS HER TRADEMARK  
HIGH ENERGY TO ALL THAT SHE DOES PROFESSIONALLY  
AND AS A COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

BY **Esther Keane**

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**W**hen Anne Conner was asked by John Lawson, CEO of W.M. Jordan, and attorney Alan Diamonstein to sit on the Mariners' Museum board of directors, she was ready to decline the offer.

Her involvement in nonprofit organizations in Hampton Roads was reaching its capacity, and she wondered what she had to offer the museum.

"Historically, my nonprofit service had been focused primarily on human services such as shelter, food and clothing," said Conner, who is president of public finance and community investment at TowneBank. "I had almost no involvement with the museum and very little knowledge of the museum as a whole."

After lunch with Lawson and Diamonstein, she thanked them and told them she would think it over, having already made up her mind to turn down the opportunity. But to her surprise, she received a letter from them the next day thanking her for her acceptance.

In a spacious conference room at the TowneBank office in Suffolk, Conner sat comfortably with a coffee in hand and recalled the event with a smile. "I thought, 'I guess I'm in because I can't turn them down,'" she said with a laugh.

In December 2008, she joined the board, resolved to give it her all. "I very quickly

got involved, and I haven't looked back," Conner said.

Eight years later, Conner is now the chairman of the board of directors for the museum. As the first female chair, she is honored to be playing a vital role in the museum's long history.

"I have always found that she has got a lot of energy, she is very well organized, and if you give her something to do it gets done on time, every time," Lawson said. "You wish you had 10 people like her."

With enthusiasm, savvy and an open mind, Conner has steadily risen to new heights as a leader both professionally and in the community.

## *a natural salesperson*

At 19 years old, Conner began her first job in banking. While a student at Virginia Commonwealth University, she took a summer job as a new accounts representative for Sovran Bank, a predecessor to Bank of America. "I thought it would just be a summer job and then I'd go back to college, but I didn't go back for several years," Conner said. "I loved the job. I loved the service aspect of it. I loved waiting on people. And it turned out I was a natural salesperson."

After two and a half years, Conner went back to school, this time at Christopher Newport University, and received a degree in finance. She worked part-time at the bank during school,





In her 30 years in banking, Anne Conner, pictured at the Mariners' Museum, has soared to great heights as a business and community leader.







Having joined the Mariners' Museum board of directors in 2008, Conner is now chair, honored to play a role in the museum's long history.

going back to full-time when she graduated. Then in 1993, Conner started two years of intensive credit and underwriting training in the bank's Relationship Manager Development Program in order to become a commercial client manager. In 1995, she obtained a commercial portfolio of nonprofit clients focused in the areas of government, public and private higher education, private secondary schools, health care, and human services organizations. It was through this opportunity that Conner found her niche. Through her work helping nonprofits with their finances, she met and worked with community leaders who have helped her reach her potential.

Over the next nine years, she grew her portfolio to more than 10 times its original size, working with organizations such as Eastern Virginia Medical School, Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters and Christopher Newport University. In 1997, she was promoted to senior vice president for commercial banking in Hampton Roads with Bank of America.

Conner was CNU's banker for many years, working closely with its president, Paul Tribble. Along with close friend and mentor the late Walter Segaloff, founder and CEO of An Achievable Dream Academy, she worked with the CNU Real Estate Foundation to assemble 40 properties around the university. She also served on the board of visitors at that time.

"As I look back over my career of 30 years now, my nonprofit services have opened more doors for me and created

more lasting relationships for me than even my professional career," Conner said.

In 2004, Conner left Bank of America and joined CNU as the CEO of its educational and real estate foundations. During her six months there, she led the university through a debt restructuring and strategic planning process in order to position the university for future financial success.

### *TowneBank makes an offer*

Once she accomplished her goal at CNU, TowneBank approached her with a new career opportunity: The bank needed someone to establish a branch in Williamsburg. It was a different direction from her nonprofit work, but with her outstanding portfolio, strong sense of community and proven ability to get the job done, Conner was a good fit for the job. She joined TowneBank in February 2005 and quickly exceeded all expectations.

"Bob Aston, CEO of TowneBank, wanted to have a \$100 million bank in Williamsburg in five years," Conner said. "I told him I could do it in two, and then we had it done in eight months."

She spent the next eight years in Williamsburg, and since opening in January 2006, the location has grown to over \$300 million in assets. Conner did it all with her usual sense of ease and joy.

"It was so exciting and so much fun to bring TowneBank to Williamsburg," she said.

Her next opportunity brought her back to nonprofit clients. In 2013, TowneBank entrusted her with a new division within the



bank. As president of public finance and community investment, Conner focuses on tax-exempt bond financing in order to finance community assets as well as making equity investments in community projects that produce tax credit. For example, Conner helped in financing the EVMS Brickell Medical Sciences Library, Sentara Obici Hospital in Suffolk and YMCAs throughout Hampton Roads.

“My job is amazing,” she said. “It is so much fun, and it’s a privilege to do this kind of banking. It’s profitable for the bank, it’s very profitable for the community, and we’re enhancing lives by the projects we finance or invest in.”

While her career has positioned her to make large financial investments in the community, Conner also makes her involvement personal by investing her own time and energy into the organizations she loves.

### *a regional citizen*

As a Hampton Roads native, Conner is immensely proud of her heritage. Born and raised in Seaford in York County, she was surrounded by her grandparents and aunts, uncles and cousins, who all lived within a few miles of each other. After establishing the Williamsburg branch, Conner moved with her family back to Seaford so that her own children could experience the benefit of growing up around family. Her deep roots combined with the opportunities provided by her career have given her a greater sense of appreciation for the Hampton Roads region.

“I have a good base of regional awareness from Williamsburg to Virginia Beach because I’ve lived and worked on both the Southside and the Peninsula,” Conner said. “I’m truly a regional citizen.”

Conner is a member of the board of directors of the Virginia Bankers Association School of Bank Management at the University of Virginia; a member of the Virginia Bankers Association Government Relations Committee; a member of the board of directors of the Achievable Dream Endowment Fund; and a member of the advisory board of the Hampton Roads Chapter of Commercial Real Estate Women.

Along with her involvement at the Mariners’ Museum, she is involved in other organizations she’s passionate about. As vice chairman of the board of directors of the Hampton Roads Educational Telecommunications Association (WHRO and WHRV Public Television and Radio in Hampton Roads), Conner focuses on enhancing education in the community and helping organizations partner with each other.

“I absolutely love that organization and am proud to be a part of something that is giving back to the community and providing education for kids and resources for teachers,” Conner said. “I’ve actually been able to bring together WHRO and the Mariners’ Museum to work together on a project addressing sea level rise.”

“It is nice to have someone as young as she is who is such a leader in our community,” said Bert Schmidt, president and CEO of WHRO. “She has proven to be an exceptional leader among leaders,

and she is someone you want to be around.”

In addition, Conner is a founding member of the board of directors of 757 Angels.



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– John O. “Dubby” Wynne,  
of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation

Under the leadership of Paul Hirschbiel, owner and president of Eden Capital, Conner helped to establish a network of 85 business leaders in Hampton Roads who provide investment and advice to selected startup companies. Only a year old, the organization has already raised \$3 million for small businesses in Hampton Roads.

Prior to her involvement with 757 Angels, Conner gained experience in her own entrepreneurial pursuit. In 2010, she partnered with Gary Warren to found ivWatch, a medical device that is able to detect IV infiltration. Conner explained that before that, IV leaks could only be detected after infiltration had taken place, damaging the soft tissue under the skin. As chairman of the board of managers, she has been heavily involved in raising equity investment.

“Gary and I established ivWatch in 2010 and have raised over \$20 million in private equity and four funding rounds over the past five years,” Conner said.

The FDA has given clearance for the first product and the company now has over 20 employees.

John O. “Dubby” Wynne, chairman of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation and former CEO of Landmark Communications, is also an investor in ivWatch and has seen firsthand the impact of Conner’s involvement.

“When she gets involved she really wants to do it right,” Wynne said. “She has high standards of performance, and I wish we had more people like her in the community who would be willing to do what she does.”

Conner is eager to name the individuals who have shaped her as a leader.

“I have been privileged to work with this region’s finest leaders, and I have seen that leadership comes in many different forms and personality styles and methods,” she said. “There is something to be learned from all of them even if my style may be very different.”

She has made it her mission to pull life and leadership lessons from community leaders, individuals such as Walter Segaloff, Bob Aston, Bert Schmidt, Dubby Wynne, who encouraged Conner to be involved with the Hampton Roads Community Foundation’s regional initiative that led to 757 Angels, and the late Josh Darden, philanthropist and co-founder of the CIVIC Leadership Institute.

“The reason I am able to do what I do is because of the





Conner, far right, is shown here with Morgan Davis, president and chief banking officer of TowneBank, and Leila Hamada, assistant to the president.

extraordinary leaders I have seen,” Conner said.

This includes the incredible women she has looked up to and partnered with throughout her career. Women such as Elizabeth “Betsy” Duke, a former Federal Reserve governor; Jackie Amato, chairman and CEO of TowneBank Mortgage; Starr Oliver, chief marketing and human resource officer at TowneBank; and Cathy Lewis, executive director of the CIVIC Leadership Institute and host of “HearSay” on WHRO.

Conner wants to carry that mantle to women in our area.

“Empowering young women and ensuring young women don’t feel constrained by anything is extremely important to me,” Conner said. “You can become anything you want to become. You will face challenges and walls and ceilings but forge ahead and you will prevail.”

Conner is proof of that.

“She has been a great employee for our bank and a role model for a lot of women in our organization,” said Morgan Davis, president and chief banking officer of TowneBank. “She is a powerhouse, and I am delighted for younger women in our company to have a chance to be around her. She sparks people with her enthusiasm to change and get something done.”

“The secret to my success is having gotten involved with nonprofits,” Conner said.

She began volunteering for Habitat for Humanity while

employed at Bank of America.

“I share with young people now to go volunteer for a big nonprofit because you will get exposed to people,” she said.

Getting to know the people she admires early on helped her create a network that she can now depend on to support the organizations she loves. And through it all, her attitude as a learner has kept her open to receiving what she needs from the leaders around her.

“I’m still learning,” Conner said. “I’m 50 now, and I’m still learning.”

Walking through the Mariners’ Museum, Conner pointed out the displays and exhibits, taking a moment to share highlights in history and how the museum acquired the various pieces and collections. With over 32,000 objects, the museum is a treasure trove of maritime history and art.

“Only 3 percent of what we have is on display,” Conner explained as she led the way to the collection storage room. Inside, the attention is on Lyles Forbes, vice president of collections and chief curator, as he pointed out a small fraction of what the room holds in art, sculptures, textiles, uniforms, scientific and navigation instruments, and ship models.

The passion is apparent as Conner studies each piece Forbes brings out to display. She frequently asks him to show her pieces that she has seen before and particularly loved, such as an old planning map of the city of Norfolk and artwork by James Edward Buttersworth.

The museum, which sits on 550 acres and contains the 167-acre





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Lake Maury and the 5-mile long Noland Trail, was founded in 1930 and contains the International Small Craft Center and the award-winning USS Monitor Center. The center exhibition and conservation lab houses 210 tons of artifacts from the Civil War ironclad Monitor.

“The Batten Conservation Complex at the Monitor Center is the largest maritime conservation lab in the world,” Conner said. The museum’s library, which is housed at the Tribble Library on the campus of CNU, has over 78,000 books, 800,000 photographs, films and negatives, and over 1 million pieces of archival material, making it the largest maritime library in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1998, Congress designated the Mariners’ Museum as “America’s National Maritime Museum.”

After chairing a yearlong strategic planning process, Conner is determined to elevate the museum to its rightful place as a national gem.

“One of the top priorities is to renovate the permanent galleries so we can display more of our collections and do more with the Monitor Center in terms of expanding its reach beyond conserving the Monitor,” Conner said. “We have the ability to conserve artifacts for the Navy, the federal government, and foreign government, so we want to broaden that. Renovating the permanent galleries would also mean more access to the collections for researchers, academics and historians, which would create value for the community here in Hampton Roads and beyond.”

“Having Conner as the chair of this institution is great because she brings so much energy and passion to leading the board and working with the staff to move forward into the future,” Forbes said. “Conner really pushed the committees and staff and members of the board to dream big and to push ourselves to find out what the identity of the museum should be.”

With her daughter attending New York University and her son a sophomore at York High, Conner is preparing herself for the eventual empty nest. But it doesn’t mean she is slowing down. She has positioned herself to sow her time, energy and resources into what she loves, which she is grateful for. “My kids are almost grown and I work for the best company in the world and I have all these extracurricular activities that are energizing and interesting,” Conner said. “I’m really looking forward to my 50s.” – **IL**

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