





# In a *league* OF HER OWN



The Navy League is best known for funding the events that surround ship ceremonies, like the 2013 commissioning of the USS Arlington.

## LESSONS LEARNED AS A COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER SHAPED MARYELLEN BALDWIN, A NAVY LEAGUE EXECUTIVE

BY **Esther Keane**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Harry Gerwien**

**O**N JAN. 10, 2009, Maryellen Baldwin joined more than 20,000 people at the Norfolk Naval Station for the commissioning of the aircraft carrier USS George H. W. Bush (CVN-77).

The high-profile event to honor the 41st president as the ship's namesake included Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Vice President Dick Cheney, Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine, as well as President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura.

For Baldwin, the executive director of the Hampton Roads Council of the U.S. Navy League, it was the proudest professional achievement to date. At the 21st ship commissioning of the Navy League, Baldwin played a strategic role in hosting events and raising funds for ship enhancements.

"It was so encompassing with the thousands that attended, the scope of people from around the world who came, the events we did and the implementation of ship enhancements that to this day are amazing," Baldwin said. "I really stepped up to work with the White House and the former president's office. It came off well and people still talk about it to this day."

Six years later, she sits behind her desk pointing out pictures around her office from the event. It might have been the pinnacle of her career but it wasn't the end.

"You never accept the status quo," Baldwin said.

Born and raised in the small town of Little Falls, N.J., Baldwin worked for the purchasing department of a large bank before getting married at the age of 22. Over the next few years, she had three sons with her late husband, Bill, who was a successful commercial contractor. Other than helping take phone calls or assisting with billing, Baldwin was settled in her role as stay-at-home mom.

The pivotal moment in her life came when the family decided to move to Hampton Roads.

"There we were with three little children, one an infant, and I was young enough and naïve enough to think it was an adventure," she said. "It was the best thing that could have happened."

Baldwin remembers thinking the only way to meet people was to get involved. She started by volunteering at her children's schools and on their sports teams. She served as the president of the PTA at Cox High School in Virginia Beach for three years, which included organizing an all-night graduation party for seniors.

Eventually she reached out further, getting involved at St. Nicholas Catholic Church and Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters. She became passionate about the work she was doing.

"I took volunteering very seriously," Baldwin said. "You have got to believe in what you are doing, you've got to feel a passion for it."

Essentially, the early days of volunteering were the start of her career. "It was a sort of evolution," she said, "one thing leading to

another.”

People began to recognize her influence and ability as a leader, so she became involved in more programs, one of them a center for pregnant girls. She was asked to be on the Virginia Beach task force for health and human services.

“I became very involved with the children’s hospital,” Baldwin said. “It really offered me the opportunity to meet people in the bigger sector of Hampton Roads and deal with issues critical to our children’s health and the politics that sometimes go on behind the scenes.”

When Baldwin became the president of the board of directors for The King’s Daughters, which is the fundraising and advocacy group for CHKD, the opportunities included attending symposiums about free health clinics in the state of Virginia.

“I believed in it,” Baldwin said. “I wasn’t saying I was an expert in medical care, but I could tell them what was going on in Virginia Beach.”

All the while, she was raising her children.

“My husband, Bill, was a leveler,” she said. “He would be able to give a broader outlook, which helped me see the bigger picture. Everybody needs that.”

Baldwin began to see a change in herself. Not only was she gaining valuable skill sets, learning about fundraising and hearing new perspectives from the business community, she was also discovering that she had a voice.

Elizabeth Weller, executive vice president of administration of Gold Key | PHR Hotels and Resorts in Virginia Beach, has known Baldwin for 20 years through CHKD.

“Baldwin is a treasure to our community,” Weller said. “Through her generosity of spirit and ability to connect with people in an honest and genuine manner, she is a gifted leader who serves the community.”

It was during a trip to Richmond to lobby for funds for health clinics that Baldwin realized she could rally support from outside sources.

“The reality of it was that someone was listening, so I needed to do my homework and be prepared,” she said.

With an affinity for the military and a deep appreciation for the sea services, Baldwin became involved with the Navy League. A member now for more than 20 years, she was the first woman president on the board of directors and has been executive director since 2000. Baldwin didn’t step into the role – she created it.

“It was clear that this job could be more than a three-year term,” Baldwin said. “I was the one who said there needed to be a change and I was offered the position.”

Baldwin was welcomed with open arms despite having no military

background. She knew it was unusual to have a woman in this male-dominated field, and she also felt her lack of education was a hindrance. Encouragement came from Adm. Vernon Clark, former chief of Naval Operations. He told her to step right into the game, that she wouldn’t be there if she wasn’t wanted.

The outcome of their talk was a new perspective for Baldwin. Instead of seeing these factors as weaknesses, she saw them as strengths and opportunities for growth.

“Because I didn’t have a military legacy, I knew only what I needed to do,” Baldwin said. “I didn’t have any inhibitions about asking the wrong questions.”

Louis Lalli, retired Navy captain and former president of the Navy League, experienced the strength of Baldwin’s leadership when he worked closely with her during the commissioning of the USS George H. W. Bush. He was the chairman of the committee at the time and accompanied Baldwin to the summer home of the Bush family in Kennebunkport, Maine, as well as to Houston to meet with former President George H. W. Bush and his family.

While there, they got to know former chief of staff Andrew Card and former cabinet members. They also visited the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, spending a whole day in the archives room, and went to a few forums in College Station, Texas.

“Even though Baldwin didn’t have any military experience,” Lalli said, “like any good leader, you don’t have to be the smartest or most experienced person in your organization. You have to know how to hire the most experienced and best people. Baldwin is excellent at doing that.”

He went on to say, “Other than her children and grandchildren, the Navy League, and living the mission of informing the citizenry of the importance of the sea services and what they do for the country, is first and foremost in her life. She doesn’t ask anybody to do anything she wouldn’t do herself.”

Baldwin’s definition of leadership is more practical than it is philosophical. “People want someone who is willing to roll up their sleeves and work,” she said. “You build credibility by doing what you say you are going to do.”

“You put the best minds that you know with and around you,” Baldwin said. “How can you lose when you have that kind of backup?”

Beyond that, it’s about having a sense of service in all levels of your life, she said.

“You have to have integrity to your commitment, to why you are doing what you are doing,” Baldwin said. “Ulterior motives do not



Capt. Bob Geis, then-commanding officer of NAS Oceana, talks with Maryellen Baldwin and her grandsons at the 70th anniversary of the naval station in 2013.

“*I don’t know anyone who doesn’t feel better after helping someone else during their day.*”

– Maryellen Baldwin, executive director of the Hampton Roads Council of the Navy League





Baldwin and her assistant, Linda Ermen, at the 2013 christening of the USS Gerald R. Ford, and Baldwin at a Navy League meeting.

work.”

“Service is core to who Maryellen is as a person and as a leader,” said Mark Honecker, executive director and chief of staff of U.S. Fleet Forces Command, “whether it is service to her three boys as a mom, service to her community with the numerous civic boards she leads, or service to her nation.

“When we think of service to the nation, we rightfully focus on those in uniform. However, there are many who don’t wear the uniform that are essential to fleet readiness by supporting sailors and their families. We are truly blessed to have Maryellen Baldwin leading our Navy League.”

The U.S. Navy League was founded in 1902 with the support of President Theodore Roosevelt who contributed to funding the nonprofit with the money he had received from the Nobel Peace Prize. The objective for the 235 councils and 43,000 active members across the country is “educational and motivational” with the sole purpose of supporting the sea services, which consist of the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine.

With the Norfolk Naval Base being the world’s largest naval station, the Hampton Roads Council, which was founded in 1961, has a great responsibility and opportunity to support service members and their families.

“We have to be a strong voice,” Baldwin said.

This means advocating for support in Washington and because of the work Baldwin has done over the years, the elected officials are aware of what the service members in Hampton Roads need.

Baldwin has the individual service member in mind while she multitasks programs, events and meetings.

“You cannot be but humbled when you meet the servicemen and their families,” Baldwin said. “It’s nice to know the people at the top but it’s even better knowing the people who are moving the work along.”

The Navy League is best known for funding what the Department

of Defense doesn’t fund for ship commissioning. This includes the numerous events surrounding the day of the ceremony that promote community awareness and involvement.

A number of high-profile people are brought into town. The events they attend include crew members and their families but it’s more than socializing, Baldwin said.

“It’s a real means for us to showcase what the military has to do to be effective in the maritime world and for people that come to the area to learn about why they should be supportive of the sea services.”

The biggest contribution goes toward ship enhancements.

Baldwin said, “We enhance areas like the chapel, the learning center, and the import cabin for the captain as well as the tribute room, which is a mini museum.”

This is done to improve the quality of life for the thousands who will utilize the ships for the next 30 to 50 years.

Approximately \$6 million will go toward the enhancements on the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78), whose commissioning will take place in 2016.

This summer, the Navy League looks forward to the commissioning of the Virginia-class submarine USS John Warner (SSN-785), honoring its living namesake, John Warner, former U.S. senator of Virginia. The commissioning will take place Aug. 1.

In addition, the Navy League makes smaller, but impactful, contributions like buying patches for uniforms or caps for service members. It also produces a commissioning book with Faircount Media Group in Tampa, Fla., to recognize and congratulate the many people involved in everything from the building of a ship to its commissioning.

A ship commissioning doesn’t happen every year, and Baldwin’s oversight also extends to the many programs and activities provided for service members and their families. On a national level, the Navy League has the Navy League Foundation, which focuses on the children of members of the sea services who are pursuing a college





Baldwin is shown with her grandchildren on the bridge of the battleship USS Wisconsin, which is berthed in Norfolk.

education; the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corp., which is a volunteer-based program that helps educate young Americans ages 11 through high school senior who are interested in pursuing a future in the sea services; and the Sea Services Award for outstanding personal contribution presented at the annual national convention.

On a local level, Baldwin said, “I am most proud of how we work with other like organizations.”

Her hope is that every service member, veteran and family member takes advantage of the resources available. She works hard to make sure the programs offering assistance are thriving, programs such as the Continuum of Resource Education, the United Services Organization, the Armed Services YMCA, the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, Fleet and Family Support Center, Ombudsman, and the Fleet Forces Command Sailor of the Year Program.

The fact that Hampton Roads as a community is supportive and cooperative gives Baldwin a great sense of pride.

“We live in a very benevolent community and we do what we do here because we make it happen,” she said.

“The primary source of income comes from the events we do as well as memberships of individuals and support from businesses.”

Years ago, direct support from Department of Defense contractors was a given. But today, outside sources have to be tapped, Baldwin said.

“In effect we do our mission a lot better because we are getting out and getting the community involved,” she said.

The perspective harkens back to lessons learned during years of volunteering.

“We are all citizens here,” she said. “We all have to do our part to step up and make sure things happen in the appropriate way.”

About Baldwin’s influence and leadership, U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell, R-Virginia Beach, said, “The Navy League of Hampton Roads could

not have a better leader, and our Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine service members and their families could not have a better advocate than Maryellen Baldwin. Her love for those who serve and her gratitude for their service is evident. The passion and enthusiasm she brings to this organization, which is so important to our community and does so much for our men and women in uniform, has my deep respect.”

Baldwin, wearing a white blouse and black dress pants and adorned with gold earrings and a gold necklace, sits at ease behind her desk. The Navy League office suite, situated among office buildings on Lynnhaven Parkway in Virginia Beach, is quiet and unassuming, belying the amount of work that goes on here.

Besides Baldwin, there are only two other people – an intern at the front desk and Baldwin’s executive assistant, Linda Ermen, working in her office down the hall. Occasionally volunteers are in the office to help with projects.

Ermen has been with Baldwin since the beginning 15 years ago. Together they brought the organization up to date, purchasing new equipment and moving to a better office space. Now, tasks range from organizing events with political and business leaders and traveling to symposiums and conventions, to filing paperwork and updating the website and Facebook page.

“You don’t get ego involved at all,” Ermen said.

“Not many executive directors would be willing to forfeit the credit, but Maryellen does. She gets everybody to grow. She is very respectful of your ideas. She encourages you to give your input, to come up with suggestions that will implement change.”

The principles Baldwin has learned throughout her journey still apply to her job today.

Learning from those around her, and putting in the effort to do the job right, are sown into her leadership style. She remains a



dedicated participant in the community beyond what the Navy League does. Currently, she is the chairman of the board of the Nauticus Foundation, a member of the board of directors for the Hampton Roads Naval Museum Foundation, a member of the board of directors for The King's Daughters, and a member of the board for the Dawson Scholarship Foundation, the Anchor Scholarship Foundation and the Wings Over America Scholarship Foundation.

To be an influencer, Baldwin said, "You have to be part of the conversation. I don't know anyone who doesn't feel better after helping someone else during their day."

The people she looks up to as mentors reinforced these principles. Being part of the Nauticus Foundation gave her an opportunity to work with leaders such as John Reinhart, executive director of the Port of Virginia, and Capt. J. William Cofer, president of the Virginia Pilot Association. Both have inspired her in how to conduct business in a way that earns the respect of those around her.

Baldwin also named women who are leaders in the Hampton Roads community such as attorney Anita Poston and philanthropist Nancy Creech.

"These women resonate with me because I like that they haven't lost their femininity. They are ladies who don't have to be one of the boys to be effective," she said.

This is the kind of example she hopes to pass on to the next generation. She encourages women to develop a thick skin, and also be confident of their skill sets and leadership abilities. Her advice to anyone: Speak up, dress well, stop apologizing.

"Life is a lot about common sense," she said. "You have to continue to learn and be open-minded and think outside the box."

Reflecting on her involvement and accomplishments, she said, "I was raised with a responsibility to give back and I became involved in programs that would keep me connected to my kids."

The ultimate reward is her family. Her three sons, Patrick, Christopher and Billy, her daughters-in-law and her six grandchildren are what's best in her life and they all live in the area. To them, she's known as Mimi. Baldwin takes them around the ships and gets them involved in what she is doing.

"The highlight now is that my grandchildren love what I do," she said. The day of the commissioning of the USS George H. W. Bush, her grandson Jake, who was 12 at the time, was her escort. Now that he is a student at Radford University, she gives him advice and passes down the valuable lessons she has learned.

She does the same for her other grandchildren, as well as quizzing them on the names of current political leaders, a game that they enjoy playing with her.

"My wish," Baldwin said, "is that my grandchildren rise to the occasion and are successful. I don't mind what they decide to do, but I want them to have a sense of responsibility to the community."

In return, they have kept her humble in the way only children can.

Baldwin recalled, "One time I showed them around a ship and one of my grandsons asked why my name wasn't anywhere to be found. It put it in perspective for me because my name will never be on one of them."

The incident reinforced why Baldwin does what she does, which is to serve the service members who sacrifice so much.

"I want to do this for as long as I can and for as long as I feel passionate about it," Baldwin said.

Which means she isn't slowing down any time soon. — IL

# Live Forever Like Lee

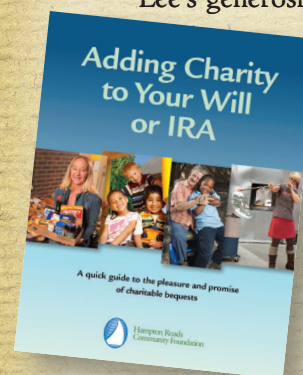
H. Lee Kanter was a Virginia Beach attorney and grocery chain founder who loved the arts. He was nicknamed "Bravoman" for leaping to his feet to lead ovations after arts performances.

Since Lee's death in 2001, his bequest to the Hampton Roads Community Foundation has provided dozens of grants to performing arts organizations in Hampton Roads.

Virginia Arts Festival, Todd Rosenlieb Dance, the Virginia Symphony and their audiences are among the beneficiaries of Lee's generosity. Because of his charitable bequest,

Lee will always bring great performances to his home region.

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