

Renee Zentz' HORSE SENSE

CEO GUIDES HBA THROUGH TOUGH TIMES, POSITIONS IT FOR GROWTH



FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS, RENEE ZENTZ HAS

been representing the Home Building Association of Colorado Springs, first in the saddle as Executive Officer and now as Chief Executive Officer. You could say she's leading the organization, but she'd disagree. "My job is to get the best and smartest people around the table," she explained. "And I get to be the idea broker, where I listen to them and create a structure that allows their ideas to take root. It's the greatest job to do when you're dealing with such brilliant people in a community that's so cohesive."

One of ten children, she was born in Alaska and moved to Arvada before she was a year old. Zentz made her way through high school by playing sports, first running track, then simultaneously playing softball and soccer. Because she's competitive by nature, she stepped up her game to play international softball and soccer.

Horses kept her out of trouble

While her true love was horses, she didn't have one, because the family couldn't afford it. That didn't stop her, though, because she rode horses throughout her childhood. In fact, she feels that sports and horses kept her on the straight and narrow. "I could easily have been in a lot of trouble," she said.

She was further kept busy working her first job during her teens, which was at the Renaissance Festival as a food wench. Her best friend's mother started the Renaissance Festival, "so every weekend, we'd drive down, sleep in the campers and do food wenching," she laughed. "I can make a mean artichoke."

As a high school sophomore, she spent a year with her father on a teaching exchange trip in Europe. That's where she fell in love with the big European warm blood horses, and where she started racing them. It's also when a light bulb turned on for her. "I learned that I could make money with horses and it could be worth going into that industry," she said.

Zentz attended Colorado State University; she was graduated in 1987 with a bachelor's degree in Animal Science, and a concentration in equine. She focused on reproduction and handled

stallions, particularly the problem and impotent ones. "It really fits perfectly with what I do now," she quipped.

First job after college: Running stallion stations

After college, she married Steve, who was in law school in Wyoming. While there, she immersed herself in training horses and running stallion stations — which is where mares are brought in to breed. Zentz managed ten or 15 stallions, where she handled the breeding and reproduction of the horse lines. She's also certified in artificial insemination for cattle and sheep.

By the mid to late '90s, Zentz was ready for the next challenge. Although she was a trainer and a nationally ranked competitor, she said, "I was good, but I wasn't great." So she looked around for something else and became the general manager at the Penrose Equestrian Center in Colorado Springs.

Quadrupled event days at equestrian center

The center seated 6,000 people and was host to one of the top 20 rodeos in the country. She was in every morning at 6, walking the barns, then returning home by 9 or 10 pm, or even later on some nights. During her eight years there, the equestrian center grew from 50 event days to more than 200 event days, including X Games, motorcycle competitions and concerts — all while maintaining its primary focus: horses. "I raised \$100,000 and put in a cross-country course for three-day events," Zentz said. "We were the only facility west of the Mississippi that could accommodate a Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association top 20 and a U.S. three-day event. We just rocked; it was awesome."

While quadrupling event days, Zentz learned more about the business model that worked so well for the equestrian center. "It was an enterprise fund," she explained, "so whatever money we made, we kept the next year; we were barely subsidized by government funds. I love that model. It was really about being thoughtful, getting community involvement and therefore, making sure those models really work." She also kept her own Dutch and Swedish horses at the equestrian center.



FAR LEFT: Renee Zentz, CEO of the HBA of Colorado Springs, fell in love with warm blood horses when she spent time in Europe as a teen. She's comfortable in both English and Western saddles, as well as in the show ring or just jumping for fun.

MIDDLE: Zentz (second from left) is a fierce competitor. She knew something was off when her husband 'kicked her butt' mountain biking trail one day. The next morning confirmed it: She was pregnant.

BELOW: At the equestrian center, Zentz felt she was living the good life. "Then something better comes along, and that's Hunter, my son," she said.



15 percent of their annual budget," she recalled.

"I told them that I didn't know what they did, because they were the experts," she added. "But I could take the non-dues revenue piece and bump it up to 50 percent right away from sponsorships and events. And I think that's what got their attention."

After interviewing with 12 past presidents

— "it was a pretty intense interview process" — she was offered the job. "And I had to make a tough decision to jump out of something I loved, knowing I had something I loved even more, which is my family."

Baby changes world view

Life was good. "That was the best of the world," she said, "and then something better comes along, and that's Hunter, my son." After mountain biking on husband Steve's 40th birthday, the couple went out for drinks. She said, "He lifted his glass and laughed, 'Here's to not having kids.'"

You see, because they were both from big families — he was one of five, himself — the couple did not plan to have children. And when he "kicked my butt mountain biking, I knew something was wrong," Zentz recalled. "The next morning, I said to Steve, 'Remember that toast last night? (He did). I said, 'Yeah, well, here you go; it's blue,'" Zentz recalled.

The funny thing (ironic, not ha ha) is that Steve is an attorney who specializes in child law, so really, it was only natural that somewhere along the line, the couple would have children, right? Zentz said, "What you don't know, you don't miss." (Talk to Renee for a few minutes and you'll find there are a lot of Renee-isms.) Happily, their lives together changed with the birth of Hunter 11 years ago.

Meanwhile, back at the equestrian center, as her pregnancy progressed, it quickly became obvious that Zentz wouldn't be able to close out events at 3 a.m. So as she looked for a different opportunity, she found the HBA had the leadership position open there.

Strong event background helps land HBA post

Zentz didn't know anything about homebuilders, or even growing an association's membership. But she did know events and marketing. At the Penrose Equestrian Center, "I was recruiting national sporting events, concerts and circuses. That was what I understood. When I looked at the HBA's pro forma, I didn't really understand how it worked."

But she did understand that the HBA's financial position was too dependent on member dues. Zentz noted that if there was a downturn in the economy, the HBA would lose its revenue because all of its income was based on assessments for building permits and membership. "The ratio of non-dues revenue was something like

Cowgirl morphs into HBA executive

She's never looked back. "This has been an amazing adventure for me," she said. "These guys helped me grow up professionally and politically, because I was pretty much a cowgirl. I mean, the only thing I didn't do was chew."

That was ten years ago. She's been through the industry's highs. And during the Great Recession, together with the board and members, she streamlined the HBA. "Our focus on the downturn was to come out with a politically strong leadership, as well as streamlined regulatory processes in city and county, utilities and regional building," Zentz said. "And we're doing really well with that. We really believe, because of our structure down here in El Paso County, our true board of directors is our city council and our county of commissioners."

She added that through the process, the HBA has found new ways of doing business, including new public/private partnerships and working more closely with the city. "This downturn was such a challenge," Zentz said. "Working through this has been very, very rewarding. We came out the strongest HBA, the largest in the region. Our building is paid for and we're well positioned coming out of this recession."

She feels that's due to the people who surround her at the HBA. "We have a great mix of highly principled developers, builders and associates on the board," she said. "We have smart, smart people at the table. So this year is just a continuum of the last three or four years."

Mom's values always behind her voice

Of course, she had a hand in all the goings on, too. And she attributes much of her voice to her mother, Rita. "My mom believed in raising very strong daughters — and she raised seven of them," Zentz said. "She believed that it was really important that women

add a true benefit to discussion and dialog, that it's important to bring the quality of a woman to the table — and that we always have a place at the table. She didn't raise any wallflowers, that's for sure." She hesitated, then laughed, "I named my first horse after her. She loved it, said it was awesome."

Zentz recently stepped down from the Range Rider Foundation Board's Latigo, an equestrian center in the Black Forest that is donated to children for equestrian or agriculturally based activities, such as 4-H and Christian rodeos. "That was about eight years of my life that was really important," she said.

Sits on EDC board

And because she's not idle by nature, she's now on the board of the new Economic Development Corporation, which resulted from a recent merger of the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce and the EDC. With only ten board seats available, she represents the industry as an ex officio board member. "I'm really honored to be on that board," she said.

Back in the saddle after a six-year hiatus

She sold her horse about six years ago and only recently started riding again. Late last year, her best friend, Cynthia, was losing her battle with breast cancer. While getting radiation treatment at Penrose Hospital, Cynthia's sister stayed in town for about ten

days in November. Zentz visited Cynthia during the evenings and one night, Zentz asked Cynthia's sister if she wanted to go out for a drink. She did and said she needed to drop some things off at the house across the street, and wanted to show it to Zentz.

She was staying at the John Zay Guest House, the \$2.2 million, 11-suite house the HBA — through HBA Cares — built for Penrose Hospital as a place for outpatients and families of patients who travel more than 30 miles to stay while getting treatments at Penrose.

Cynthia's sister didn't know that Zentz had anything to do with the house, and until she walked into the house, Zentz didn't know she was staying there. "As we're walking down the hallway," Zentz observed, "she's showing how beautiful this or that feature is of the house. She's just going on about the detail, and I'm bawling. She asked if I was okay, and I said it was just so beautiful. It was one of those moments of what you do now, you have no idea of how it's going to affect you later in life."

Cynthia lost her fight with cancer on New Year's Day. "And she gifted me her Andalusian horse from Spain," Zentz said. "So I have a beautiful horse named Athena, who's just fabulous. I'm now getting back into horses, so it's pretty cool."

Earlier this year, Zentz was named Colorado Spring's 2012 Businesswoman of the Year. The award name? Athena. "It was a neat follow up to what happened," she said. ■■



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