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Stepping Up to Success

Katherine Christensen, Laura Scheller and Jamie Cook have a lot in common. They've each raised a family in the Ahwatukee community; each founded her own business; and each is an award-winning meeting and planning professional and a leader in Arizona's top industry. As moms, business-owners and frequent travelers, their day-to-day life can get a bit frenzied. And as Laura and Jamie and Katherine will tell you, sometimes there's nothing better than having a friend and mentor to call - whether you need a babysitter, an invoice template, or just to share a few stories with someone who understands.

By Amanda Kehrberg

Photos by BabesPhotos.com



From left to right: Laura Scheller, Jamie Cook and Katherine Christensen.

“When I was a little girl,” says Jamie Cook, “there was just one type of successful businesswoman. She always had the same suit on, with the nylons and the pumps, and she made six figures. She was a take-no-crap kind of person.” Jamie’s wearing a fire-truck red polo bearing the logo of a client’s company, shoes from The Walking Store, and a glittery silver watch that she gave to herself for the 10-year anniversary of her small business. “It makes me laugh now, because I’m nothing like that!”

It’s the same image fellow Ahwatukee businesswomen Laura Scheller and Katherine Christensen grew up with. The three are gathered for a rare leisurely lunch at That Italian Place before returning to often hectic, 16-hour days. Together, they present a very different, modernized version of the successful woman in business: warm, friendly and family-oriented. She wears comfy, practical shoes by day and bunny slippers by night, juggles 2:00 a.m. faxes with laundry, and relishes the escape of a dark movie theatre. She wakes up on business trips in hotel rooms in exotic locales and wonders, “Where am I again?” She knows the room-service menu like the back of her hand, and arrives home craving a good old, home-cooked meal.

“Success doesn’t just mean one thing anymore,” Jamie continues, “and that’s what’s exciting. Today, women are creating their own businesses and running them the way they want to and deciding what success means to them.”

Raising a Family

When it comes to success, Jamie, Laura and Katherine share a remarkable story. They first met many years ago through the Meeting Professionals International (MPI - www.mpiweb.org) Arizona Sunbelt Chapter, where, at the June 11 gala, Laura was named President-Elect (a position both Katherine and Jamie had previously held), Jamie accepted the Edward Scannell Lifetime Achievement Award, and Katherine the Planner of the Year Award (additions to the long list of awards the three have already garnered in their careers).

Each lives in Ahwatukee - Jamie for 15 years, Laura for 17 and Katherine for 22 - and even more remarkably, in Lakewood (they even share the same pool man, “Leonard”).

“It’s a beautiful place to live and to raise your family,” says Laura. “Kyrene has such an awesome school district.” Katherine, possibly the Ahwatukee Chamber of Commerce’s most enthusiastic member and the Past Chair of the Chamber Board, adds how much she appreciates the small-town atmosphere. “The people that live here are so involved in their

community and in the school and their children,” she says, echoing a sentiment often expressed by local teachers.

All three women mirror the same dedication to family integral to the community they call home, something that bonded them from the beginning. Jamie and Laura have been married for about the same amount of time, and their daughters’ birthdays are only two weeks apart. When their daughters were in preschool, they’d trade

off picking them up depending on who was most busy. “We became our backup parents!” says Jamie. Both Katherine’s son and daughter babysat for Jamie and Laura’s kids, and Katherine remembers Jamie bringing her baby in when she did contract work for her company, Katherine Christensen and Associates (KCA). “I’d put her in the playpen when she was going to take a nap and then work for a few hours,” Jamie says with a laugh.

Growing a Business

The desire for the flexibility to raise a family was what really drove all three women to start their own businesses. Katherine was the first, debuting KCA in 1991. “It was really a cutting edge move at that time for an independent meeting planner,” Jamie explains. For her, Katherine was an inspiration - and a huge help - when she started her own business, Strategic Meetings, Ltd., in 1999. Jamie admits it was scary when she first started out, and Katherine’s guidance and experience were invaluable. “It’s nice to have people who you know and trust and respect and who are willing to take your call and answer your question, from ‘What’s the best printer to buy?’ to ‘Do you think we should start a money market?’” When Laura founded her business, Solmonte Hospitality, she benefited from the experience of both Jamie and Katherine. “Both of these ladies were not only willing to share their information and their time and their wisdom, but they also helped me to get contract work, because it takes a little while to get



your own client base," says Laura. "Having that extra support was huge. And to open up their businesses knowing that I was a competitor and allow me to work for them and let me see how they did things firsthand was very progressive."

What is a Meeting Planner?

Katherine, Jamie and Laura are all Certified Meeting Professionals ("an extensive process!" says Laura) who work under the umbrella of meeting and planning, each with a particular focus. Laura works with companies and organizations nationwide to help them locate a venue for their group events and then set up a contract with the selected hotel. Her job is to make sure that the contract is an equitable arrangement in her clients' best interest. "We negotiate room rates, we negotiate how much food and beverages they have to commit to, that kind of thing," she explains.

With KCA, Katherine - whose speech is often peppered with well-crafted potential slogans for any topic that comes up, as though she's never quite away from the office - focuses on public relations and meeting and event planning, from "a local charity golf tournament down at Wild Horse Pass to something at Cannes," she says. But Katherine also manages the "supplier" side of meeting and planning as a destination management expert with PRA Arizona. Destination experts are hired by meeting planners to coordinate all the details in a particular destination, from selecting transportation companies to entertainment and activities to lighting and floral. "Because we're that destination expert, we can pull all those pieces together for them, and it can be one of those or it can be all of them," Katherine explains. "It's the fun part from the attendees' perspective."

Jamie, in her capacity as a meeting planner, is someone who might hire a destination management expert. She focuses on corporate meetings and incentives, coordinating everything from a company's annual strategic planning and budgeting meeting to its incentive trips for employees who have hit top sales targets. Incentive trips are the most fun, she says, because "no one told them they had to be there; they earned it." It's impossible to hear about incentive trips these days without thinking of companies like AIG, which have been skewered in the news for spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on employee trips while the company was in financial trouble. But there's another story behind the headlines. "It's very bottom-line driven. I get a lot of people who say, 'Oh my goodness, look at all this money they're spending on this trip to Cabo!' If someone would step back and look at the bottom-line figures, if someone puts it together correctly, there's a million dollars of sales there," says Jamie. "You want

someone to feel special and you want to say thank you, because the key purpose of the incentive is to motivate and inspire people to make the company the most money." Plus, Katherine adds, husbands and wives who are invited along on incentive trips can be great motivators back home for their spouses to win the trip again next year!

"Basically, you're creating an experience, which is what we all do," says Jamie. "We create experiences. Everyone thinks planning is just about organization and details, but that's only half of it. The other half is looking at the big picture and really being creative." Laura agrees: "My husband uses the term 'automagically.' When people attend meetings and conferences, they think that things sort of automagically happen, which is good, but there's in fact a huge amount of time and effort that goes into it."



Working Together

In the midst of what is frequently a chaotic industry, with long days, fastidious clients, and lots of travel ("Last year, I had 32 trips!" says Katherine), it's invaluable to have a core support group who understands all the little ups and downs. Their advice to women in business? "Work together," says Laura. Katherine suggests: "Put together an informal

advisory board of people you respect and who know more than you, so they can give you the guidance you need." Having people to turn to with a shared experience, even if you only have time for a phone call now and then, is significant. "Because it's hard when you're a working mom and you have to balance family and business and travel," says Laura.

Their dedication to mentoring hasn't ended with each other; all three have either taught classes or been guest speakers at local colleges, in addition to employing interns at their companies. They agree it's exciting to be helping to teach the next generation of meeting and planning professionals. "We really want this industry to succeed," says Jamie.

Speaking of ups and downs, Jamie shares a recent anecdote that both Katherine and Laura can relate to:

"I had a florist make a centerpiece and someone actually said, 'You know, I really like it, but could those berries be a little bit lighter?' Well, I don't know, I could talk to God about that."

They all laugh. "But your answer was not no!" says Katherine. "Of course not," Jamie says, "I said I'd look into it!"

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