

Mississauga Business Times

Survival motivated PBG president

Giving back to community is now the driving force for outgoing United Way chair Linda Kuga Pikulin

By Jan Dean

Linda Kuga Pikulin is the personification of the successful executive. Since 1998 she has been president of the Pepsi Bottling Group (Canada) Co. (PBG) – the corporation's highest ranking female executive. But where Pikulin says ambition motivates most executives to advance their careers, her motivation was survival. Now that she has survived, her goal is to give back to the community.

Pikulin was just 19 and a first year student at Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh when her father died. The responsibility of supporting her mother and three younger siblings fell to her. The family had always struggled to make ends meet. Her father, with only a grade six education, had worked three low-paying jobs: as a plant operator at the local water treatment plant, driving a beer truck, and working for a mortician in the blue collar town of Aliquippa, 35 miles outside of Pittsburgh.

Pikulin says her childhood was wonderful in terms of family, but always on the edge when it came to money. When her father died, her mother who was a stay-at-home-mom, was left with just \$10,000 in a pension. Pikulin started working full-time to support the family while she went to school.

After getting her degree and putting in a short stint at Xerox, she took a sales job at PBG. She had a simple goal. "I wanted to immunize my family from ever experiencing financial hardship again, and PBG did that for me," she says.

But getting that immunization for her family came at a cost – 12 moves in the next 17 years. The first move, after she had worked for PBG for two years was "the hardest thing I have ever done," she says.

"I was 25/26, and leaving my family, going to New Jersey where I didn't know anyone, finding my own place, but it was necessary." It was an experience she was to repeat almost every 18 months for several years as she moved up the PBG ladder.

With each move to a new town and farther up in the PBG organization, there was a new risk to overcome. First it was moving from sales to an operating role in the organization, learning new skillsets and learning leadership.

There were no female executive role models around her in the early 1980s – it was a time when corporations were dominated by white males. Many of her moves put her in parts of the U.S. where women in executive roles were considered an anomaly and sometimes, not a desirable one. She did it all for family.

"After my father passed away, I was the role model for my family," says Pikulin.

She worked hard to set the pattern she wanted her brother and sisters to follow: getting a college education, and working hard. "I wanted them to realize they should work hard because that's a part of life, that they needed to take risks, and never forget family."

Along the way she decided that when she was able, she wanted to do something to help other people so they never had to go through what her own family did.

Pikulin says for the past decade she has been doing just that. In 2004 she established the Dr. Donna J. Kuga Trustee Scholarship at Penn State University to honour her sister's victory over breast cancer. Her sister is director of academic affairs at the university. In 2006 Pikulin joined the campaign cabinet for the United Way of Peel Region, and in 2007 took on the challenge of serving as the campaign chair.

Pikulin, whose company is based in Mississauga, says joining the board was a



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way of testing her mettle. The experience has been as rewarding for her as it has been for United Way.

Pikulin used her business skills and network to promote the organization – and thus to support the more than 50 programs in the community the United Way funds.

The experience has made Pikulin's retirement goals even stronger.

When she retires from her role as president of PBG in Mississauga, she plans to move back to the U.S. where her husband of six years lives and works.

She'll dedicate her retirement to philanthropy.

Her goal is to make a difference. She did that for her family, and family continues to be the anchor for her life.

"My mother still lives in the same house where she has lived for more than 50 years," she says. "It's the house where I grew up. I will always call 'home' the place where my mom is. And when I go back to that house, it's the best sleep I ever get."

Canada has become her second home, and United Way is a passion.

"Many people ask me why I am involved with United Way," said Pikulin in a United

Way speech.

"My answer is simple: I know what it's like to worry about not having enough. When I was growing up, our family struggled to make ends meet. Fortunately ours was a very loving and caring family. But my father only had a grade six education and so held low-paying jobs. In our community, we didn't have access to services and programs that would have made things easier. But today, through United Way, I can help make a difference for people in our community."