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A Profile of Sharon Kelly Hake: A Former DuPont Co. executive in Delaware who is president and CEO of Great Dames, which develops leaders

Sharon Hake takes the lead.

BY PAM GEORGE

One Great Dame

When Sharon Kelly Hake and her six siblings gathered around the dinner table, their father routinely asked each child the same question: “What did you do today to justify your existence?”

Anticipating the question, the children would grow nervous. “Of course, we never had a good enough answer,” says the Overbrook, Pa., native. “How do you answer that when you’re 8 or 9 years old? But he really did challenge us.”

As she grew up, Hake continually contemplated the question, even after she earned a bachelor’s degree from Pennsylvania State University and a master’s from Temple University—and even after a nearly 30-year successful career with the DuPont Co., eight years of which were spent working closely with CEO Ellen Kullman. “I hit 50, and I realized that I never really answered that question very well,” says Hake, who was a global marketing and strategy leader at DuPont.

Today, Hake would have much to say at the Kelly family dinner table. She is president and CEO of Great Dames, which seeks to develop leadership skills in women—and men—through workshops, coaching and “discovery circles,” small, salon-type get-togethers focused on a topic. Great Dames rallies participants around nonprofit causes, such as collecting coats for homeless shelters, and Hake and her team apply their own leadership skills to client projects.



Great Dames (from left) Izzy Mead of Wilmington, Mary Pat Knauss and Sharon Hake of Kennett Square, Pa., Heather Hake Cassey of Philadelphia, and Kathy Palokoff of Baltimore gather for an informal chat. Photograph by Jared Castaldi

It's a lot to wrap your brain around. Suffice it to say that Great Dames, founded in 2009, is a convergence of Hake's passions. "She really cares a lot about people," says first lady Carla Markell, who worked with Hake on a project to promote volunteerism in the state. "She's very tenacious and good at figuring out how her skill can be used to elevate a project to the next level. She's also skilled at communicating and reaching people to make an effort more effective."

Mary Dupont would agree. Dupont, director of financial empowerment in the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, first met Hake at a volunteerism conference. "Everybody was sitting around, chatting and waiting to get started when Sharon walked in the room," Dupont recalls. "I sort of saw the electricity surrounding her. I said to myself, 'I've got to meet this person.' She is so responsive and accessible."

Sitting in the cafeteria at Winterthur Museum, Hake's enthusiasm is evident yet never overwhelming. The Kennett Square, Pa., resident is so excited about Great Dames that she ignores her veggie panini. But unlike some energetic people, she takes time to consider her words, and, even more important, to listen to her lunch companion and ask questions. Her vibrancy is enhanced by her pixie-like appearance—she's someone who was probably carded well into her 30s. Even the most cynical curmudgeon can't help but be impressed by her joy for her work.

The idea for Great Dames percolated in Hake's mind for at least five years before she started the company. Through her job, which took her all over the world, she met many female leaders. Although they had success both personally and professionally, many felt something was missing. "The piece was legacy," Hake says. "What impact will I have? How will people describe me or talk about me?"

Hake's own quest for legacy was clearly prompted by her father, U.S. District Judge James McGirr Kelly. He presided over such notable cases as the 1991 sentencing of five Upper Darby police officers to jail terms for the beating and false prosecution of a man and his son. In 1995 Kelly watched as two men entered guilty pleas for the second-degree murder of his son and Hake's brother, Christopher, who in 1993 was killed during a robbery of an Overbrook Tavern.

"Christopher's death had a big impact on me—and all of us," Hake says. "Probably the biggest impact was seeing my father's response. He handled the loss with such grace and spirituality. He challenged us not to give up on people, to continue to believe that every one of us is basically good and has something important to contribute to society."

Hake's mother was a successful dress designer. "But in those days, when you had children, you were sort of 'invited out,'" she says. "Today, she'd be the CEO of a company." For a nine-member household, living on one paycheck was not "easy street," Hake says, "but I had a wonderful childhood."

At Penn State, Hake met husband-to-be, Glenn. She then went to the Fox School of Business at Temple University. DuPont recruited her on campus, and the couple moved to Midtown Brandywine in 1981 and later to a neighborhood near Bellevue State Park. (Glenn also works for DuPont.) Daughters Heather and Deirdre went to Ursuline Academy.

Hake's work didn't hamper family time, recalls Heather Hake Cassey. "Not a lot of my friends' mothers worked, so I was proud of her," she says. "We understood the value of hard work, and through her example, we learned all about it. She is inspirational—a brilliant woman I always looked up to."

Cassey was 13 when the family moved to Spain, where the Hakes both had assignments for DuPont. "It was nerve-racking, but in the end, it fed a lot of my interests going forward," says Cassey, who after graduating from Penn State helped launch a school in Korea.

When Cassey moved home from Korea, Hake approached her with her idea for Great Dames. Hake realized that time was running out on her ability to make the kind of impact she wanted to make. She also

recognized that many in Cassey's generation want to find purpose while they're still young. "We started working together, looking for gaps for working women in terms of their potential for becoming better and more fulfilled leaders," says Cassey, director of operations.

But what do they mean by leaders? In 1980s dress-for-success terms, a leader takes command in the company boardroom and on a nonprofit's board. To Hake, leadership is defining and understanding your potential.

"The number one person you need to lead is yourself," she says. "It's about creating meaning in your life."

The name Great Dames is clearly "a statement about women," Dupont says. Indeed, women love the name, Hake says. Men are often perplexed. When Hake led a coed workshop, the male organizer asked if he could simply introduce her by her name and not mention the company. "I said, 'Whatever makes you comfortable,'" she says.

Along with workshops for organizations on such topics as "personal branding," Great Dames hosts Discovery Circles, which are limited to about 20 people, mostly women. These aren't feel-good group therapy sessions. They're discussions, led by a facilitator who submits a topic idea. Anne Coleman in May talked about finding a passion through volunteerism. She'd spent three months in Tanzania, where she taught English.

"It was something I'd always wanted to do," she says. "I talked about what led me to that point." In September, Great Dames launched a series of Discovery Circles based on the book "The Artist's Way."

In exchange for their time, facilitators choose a charity to receive a donation. Hake has taken it a step further. Great Dames' nonprofit arm, whose funds are kept separate from the for-profit enterprise, has collected 500 coats for Delawareans in need and encouraged clothing donations, distributed to local nonprofits.

Between workshops, discovery circles and consulting projects, Great Dames has been a full-time job for Hake—and that's just the way she likes it. "I don't see myself ever retiring from Great Dames," she says. "Why? If you're a great dame you'll always be a great dame."