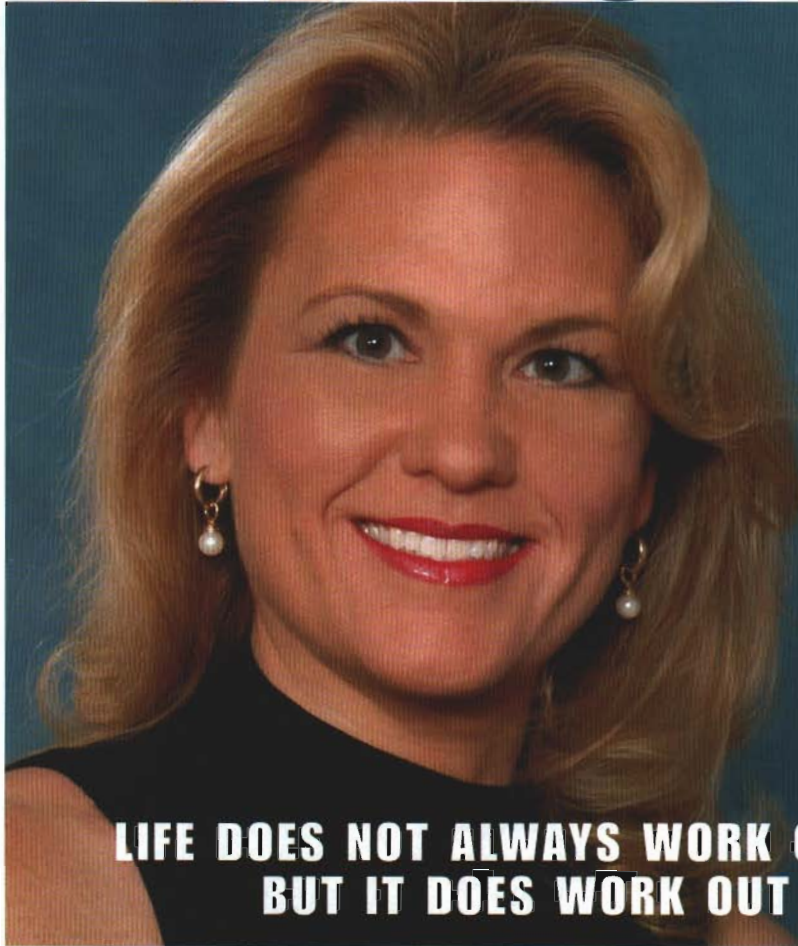


THE LAST WORD

By MICHAEL WATT



Take Kimberly Jennings, for instance. She grew up on the battlefields of the Civil War and her early career kudos includes authoring a text book regarding a medical procedure that was later used for a college training program. She also parlayed her twirling skills into a top placement in a Miss Virginia USA beauty contest.

LIFE DOES NOT ALWAYS WORK OUT AS WE PLANNED, BUT IT DOES WORK OUT IF YOU LET IT.

So what's a nice girl like this doing in a place like Long Island?

"In life you find every opportunity [is a chance] to make the best of things," says the 30-something Jennings, the marketing director for Grassi & Co., a 95-member accounting firm based in Lake Success.

She graduated from high school at 16 and skipped her junior year "because I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a chemist." While attending a small college in Virginia she interned at a local hospital and after graduating she worked full time in its laboratory. "We conducted complicated tests like you see on [the television show] 'CSI,' with forensic tests diagnosing cancer and heart attacks, things like that."

She developed a training program and textbook called "Preparation for Phlebotomy" that was later used by a college for its phlebotomy program. (Phlebotomy is the practice of opening a vein by incision or puncture.) While toiling amongst the test tubes she was encouraged to take her twirling skills to the state stage, entering the

contest for Miss Virginia USA. She came close but did not win—there was no talent competition—but enjoyed the experience all the same.

"All those projects taught me something that I was able to use in the rest of my career," Jennings says. "It is the mindset that says yes to new experiences that stretches you beyond the limitation of what your job description calls for."

The hospital eliminated its research facilities in the mid-1980s and Jennings was encouraged to work in its burgeoning marketing department. From there she teamed up with a co-worker's husband to start Schneider Drug Testing, a drug-testing laboratory.

"It was the most exciting thing I have ever done. I developed everything from forming the technology side of the company to the marketing side." The company grew and the endeavor was a success, but Jennings felt a tug. "I knew I needed to break away from the 'Old South' style of business and move to New York, for the challenge, if nothing else.

What I found is that business is all the same in the North and South. It comes down to relationships."

Once in New York she landed a gig with Grassi & Co., where she has been since 2000. In March she was named one of the "Top Women in Construction" by New York Real Estate Journal. (Grassi & Co. monitored the financial aspects of the World Trade Center clean up effort.) But it is not all work and no play for Jennings. "One hundred percent of my energies are focused on growing this company but when I am home the work hat goes off and the home hat goes on. I cook and sew and do all those fun domestic things."

She admits her life has not exactly turned out the way she figured it would but adds, "You create your reality with your attitude about your reality. The real key is to recognize the opportunity; all those things are out there but whether you have the openness to grab it when you see it is one of the defining factors [in our lives]."