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Rising to New Heights With Your Wingspouse

This is Episode number 84 of Stay Happily Married, "Rising to New Heights With Your Wingspouse."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here via Skype with Kathi Browne. Kathi and her husband Mark have been married for almost 20 years. Kathi worked as a creative and a technical writer before getting married and supporting her husband in his career. She worked on turning the typical role of executive wife into a mutually supportive element in her marriage and now she gives seminars and blogs about the wingspouse concept.

Welcome to the show, Kathi. I'm glad you could join us.

Kathi Browne: Thank you, Lee. It's nice to speak with you.

Lee Rosen: What is a wingspouse? What does that term mean?

Kathi Browne: Well, a wingspouse is a spouse of an executive who actively participates in the executive career and considers that the career choice. She is typically the one who will do the background work using whatever skills she has to bring to the table. And the two of them work together to get the most out of the career and gain success.

Lee Rosen: Now, how did you come up with -- give me some background on you and how you came up with the whole wingspouse concept. And I love the name wingspouse; I think that's really clever. But how did that come about?

Kathi Browne: Well, when my husband and I met, I was climbing the corporate ladder in the computer industry and Mark was making his way through medical school. And shortly after becoming a doctor Mark began taking on administrative duties, which took away from his ability to hold down responsibilities at home, and I had to do more and more.

As my husband transitioned from private practice to hospital administration, I had to choose between raising a family and holding onto my own career. And so I became a stay-at-home mom and I still craved the challenges of a career.

And I watched my husband climb the ladder and I think in a way I lived vicariously through him for a while. And at one point Mark worked for a really difficult CEO who was -- let's just say not nice. And this person became our common enemy and united us as a team.

And I began covering his back and helping him where I could and -- kind of hence the name "wingspouse" because a wingman in the pilot industry is considered someone who has the back of the co-pilot. So that's how the name came up.

And I just discovered that I had great satisfaction in participating and doing things for him and really feeling like the career was ours rather than his. And at the same time we grew so much closer together as we would kind of lick each other's wounds and celebrate the victories.

And Mark started to recognize the value that I brought to the table and we kind of together developed this wingspouse concept where he found ways that I could do things that extended him and I got the fulfillment I needed in the career. And at the same time, he was my mentor. And there are just so many aspects of the wingspouse concept that are so good that I consider it my alternative career. It really is my career.

Lee Rosen: Well, now I'm guessing you get some push-back from some women. It does seem like -- in the media, anyway, at least -- a lot of women are supposed to be able to have it all today, that you can have a family and a career. Do people really have to choose, you think, between one or the other?

Kathi Browne: Oh, definitely. Every day. I mean, the feminist movement had great intentions but it left a lot of unanswered questions. Like, if both of us are working, who's bonding with the children? Or if both of us

focus on a career, who decides when we move? We have a lot of divorcees out there now with great careers and no one to celebrate it with and there was just a hole there that I didn't feel like I had a good answer yet.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you've lived this life of being married to a successful, busy executive. What kind of problems -- what are the issues that come up for the spouse of that person? What do you see as the common issues that people in your position have to face?

Kathi Browne: Executive spouses have additional challenges -- and blessings; I don't want to deny those -- that have to be realized. They likely have to move frequently and they give up the family support system that is so desperately needed when you don't have a spouse at home to help you with the things that go on at home.

They have to face doing a lot on their own. And when something goes wrong, their spouse might not be there to help them out. That has happened to me even in the case of a house fire, believe it or not.

They're judged by society as less important because they don't maintain a career. And yet they're accused of being bad mothers if they do.

The struggle at home is incredible and raising children who don't feel shorted of one parent or the other is a constant challenge. And to top it off, when the smoke clears and they want to return to a career, they have a lot of empty spaces on their resume. There's no experience. There's no success to show off. Just a successful husband -- or an ex in some cases.

Lee Rosen: How does that make the wingspouse feel? What is the impact of all that on their sort of emotional state?

Kathi Browne: The spouse of the executive is often bitter. They're not only left with feeling like they're kind of taken advantage of and underappreciated, but they feel like they've given up so much and nobody even seems to notice. And it's just expected. It's expected by society and, in many cases, naively expected by the executive. And after a while a spouse can just feel like they don't even have their own identity; they're just the other shadow spouse.

Lee Rosen: Do you feel like that even gets reinforced -- that people just don't really -- I don't know. I do feel like there's sort of a negative -- maybe a little bit of a stigma attached now to being a stay-at-home spouse, or that people maybe see them differently than people that

are working at a full-time career. Am I perceiving that accurately, do you think?

Kathi Browne: Unfortunately, yes. As a stay-at-home spouse I've been excluded from conversations by bank presidents who didn't realize I was in charge of the finances. When I attended community networking events, conversations quickly died after I answered the question, "What do you do for a living?" I started coming up with some interesting answers just to show that I still had something to talk about.

Even recently I was insulted by several self-proclaimed feminists for my wingspouse concept. They accused me of condoning the subservient wife role because I suggested that women didn't have to go out and earn their own paycheck. Newsflash: It's our paycheck.

Lee Rosen: Right. It is though, I think, a very different way to look at things than at least some -- than has become sort of trendy or popular over time.

Let me ask you this, though. When you talk about spouses feeling sort of unappreciated and that sort of thing, do you think that certain spouses are more likely to not feel good about themselves in this kind of situation? Are there certain kinds of personality types that just lend themselves to this not really feeling good?

Kathi Browne: I don't know if it's a personality type. I would say that the spouses who really had a drive for success before they married an executive probably tend to recognize what they're missing out on sooner. I've known families that have been pulled apart by the struggles that came from an executive lifestyle because the spouse would feel unappreciated and lonely.

And there's such a stereotype out there that -- I guess if you don't mind the stereotype it might be easier to swallow. But for the woman who really feels like she has to have her own identity -- or even the man who wants to have his own identity, who might be married to an executive or a politician or something -- there is a stereotype that I do think is a little stronger for women.

And that stereotype is that she must be smart enough, or maybe pretty enough, to attract a successful man, but she's not smart enough to have her own job. And her advice is nothing more than meddling and she has no idea what real work means. And this is so far from the truth.

And there are executive spouses all over who would be running companies of their own if they weren't so devoted to their own spouses and families.

Lee Rosen: So you've lived through this. I'm sure you have experienced the feedback that you talk about from others and the range of emotional response to all of that and so you came up with this idea of wingspouse. But how does wingspouse -- how does the concept address the problem? What are you trying to do with it?

Kathi Browne: The wingspouse gets satisfaction out of the career that would otherwise rule over the family. So rather than letting the career take over the house, the wingspouse welcomes this as her own source of fulfillment. So it really is a job. It's not just going home and taking care of the house. Those are the stay-at-home aspects.

Whoever does the finances, whoever raises the kids, whoever does the housework -- you may even hire those things out; that's not mine to say -- but the wingspouse portion is the actual career interaction, the networking with people to make connections to be more successful, the schmoozing at the recruitment dinners so that not only the recruit but the spouse fall in love with the community, making the right connections within and outside of the business, even doing fact checking outside of the office day.

The wingspouse fulfills whatever need she's qualified to do to participate in the career and feel like she's actively giving back and adding value to the career itself.

Lee Rosen: So instead of her being at some event as just sort of an accident that she's the spouse and she's been invited, she's actually going with a plan. I mean, she's going with the mindset of this is an event that we're taking on as a couple that we're going to use to advance our overall career and economic situation. I guess it's a real shift of the way you look at things.

Kathi Browne: Yeah. And you hit the nail on the head. That's exactly what it's about. And it's not in a conniving way, but if you're going to go to an event and you're going to have all of these people who are potential contacts or networks or just simply help you build a relationship -- whether it's in the community or whether it's in your business or whether it's making a connection some time in the future -- when both partners understand the importance of those connections and they both go out there with that in mind, there's so much possibility and so much more success.

And quite frankly, women in a social environment can make connections in a very unassuming way that an executive himself just can't make.

Lee Rosen: Would I be way off base to think that Michelle Obama sort of epitomizes this concept? Is she arguably a really good example of a wingspouse?

Kathi Browne: Well, you know, it's funny you say that because the problem CEO -- the united force that I referred to earlier -- when we were in the job interview together and this CEO addressed me, I was so naïve at the time. But the comment she made was, "Are you ready to accept the role as first lady?" And I thought, "Oh, how sweet."

But then I realized that's not what she meant. She really meant to tell me that I was expected to fulfill obligations without anything in return. And that's kind of where the wingspouse concept also developed from was, okay, if she wants me to be the first lady, I'll give her the first lady. But that really is what it's about, but there's a wrong way and a right way to go about it.

And yes, I think Michelle Obama is an excellent example of being an extension of her -- I guess you would call him an executive husband. President of the United States. You don't get a whole lot higher than that, do you?

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. No, very interesting. And I do think that her being in that role -- I guess she is -- not totally unusual. We've had other career people take that role. But she has very much put her career on the backburner and is playing the role, I guess, that you're describing. She's certainly out there helping with networking and relationships and everything else.

Let me ask you about your life. How have you applied the wingspouse concept to your family? How do you see it playing out for you as an individual?

Kathi Browne: Well, besides the obvious aspect that I talked about before where I finally felt like I was getting some career satisfaction, and also the mentoring. The mentoring is really great. So from a career aspect I feel like I personally have really benefited from it.

But every day I look forward to what Mark and I will face together. Even though now he's actually left hospital administration and he's now a physician consultant, so his role and my role have both changed, which is why I'm able to start concentrating on sharing what I know about the wingspouse concept. But I never wonder if

he appreciates me. And he always assures me that I'm qualified to take on whatever challenge I want to take on.

So in a way -- in a strange way he's now becoming my wingspouse as his obligations have started to wane and I'm starting to begin my second career. He's actually the one who's doing some of the things for me that I used to do for him. And I'm quite amused by that and that quite appreciative and humbled by it also.

Lee Rosen: Right. That is terrific, yeah. A real role reversal. I guess it's a gender-equal opportunity in terms of who is the wingspouse.

Kathi Browne: Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: And it seems like we're seeing more and more men who might be in that wingspouse role as things change and the world moves on. Very interesting.

Now, the website. You've got the website. Let's talk about that. And I also want to ask you about the seminars and the workshops. But what are you trying to do with the website at wingspouse.com?

Kathi Browne: Well, it's funny how that evolved because originally I intended to make my second career one of an author. I wanted to write a book, maybe two or three. And so I started working on the concept of sharing my life evolving into a wingspouse.

And I knew that I had not really been writing the way I wanted to be writing for so long that I wanted to practice. So I started a blog and I decided to write about the things that I knew something about. And as I evolved into the wingspouse I really grew to have a passion for executive advice, leadership advice. I love it. I read the books. I try to go to seminars. I just love that sort of thing. So I wanted to share it in a way that I could apply it to my life and other people's.

And so the blog started to develop. And as I posted the articles, people started responding to me privately because in the wingspouse world, people who hold that position don't really want to be seen publicly. They kind of want to stay in the background. They don't want to admit that they play a role because it's not really acceptable to some employers. And so I get a lot of private e-mails. And I would get people actually asking me to write about certain subjects. And I even became a guest blogger on a related topic for physician wives.

So as that grew I started to realize there was such a need for that kind of information that as career counselors approached me I

started putting together seminar materials and the old career in me started to come back.

And I've always loved to speak. And I realized that my opportunity for a second career was really the seminars and the blog and the whole sharing of the wingspouse concept. And my book, quite honestly, has gotten put to the side for now. But it will be done some time.

Lee Rosen: So the website is percolating and you're doing some speaking. What are you doing? You're doing like seminars and workshops and that kind of thing?

Kathi Browne: Yes. On the blog itself I write articles that address women or men -- any spouse who's married to executives -- and some of the topics that they might be concerned with. More recently I've been expanding it to advice to the executive from my perspective. And I've also done some interviews of some of the wingspouses so people can get an idea of how a wingspouse thinks.

The seminars are related to that and my primary -- it's a seminar. There's some workshop aspects to it. I have half-day and full-day seminars basically teaching people to be a wingspouse. And I don't mean which fork to use. I mean going through the steps of evaluating what your strengths are and what your executive partner's strengths are and what his or her weaknesses are and how you two can help each other in the weaknesses and the strengths to combine a united force.

And I call that the SEE-EO -- that's SEE-EO -- concept or approach, where you "see" what is needed and you "evaluate" how you can address those needs and then you "offer" the services as a partnership. And that's just one of the first and primary seminars that I focus on, because if you don't have those basic aspects of it you really can't go any further than that.

And then I have some individual seminars that are actually getting into the meat of a wingspouse, like: how you can be a participant in the job hunt, because there's so much that a wingspouse can do to really tip the tables to get that perfect job; or using social media to promote an image; networking to make the right connections for the career; how to deal with overcommitment and a stressful household; how to transition -- after you've been a wingspouse all those years, what do you put in place ahead of time so when you're no longer needed as a wingspouse you have something to show for it and somewhere to go with it?

Those are just some of the topics I deal with.

Lee Rosen: Right. No, it really sounds like you have thought through the issues that a wingspouse would face and you've come up with a great way to teach people so that they're not surprised. It sounds fantastic.

I've spent a fair amount of time recently looking at wingspouse.com and it seems like you've got a constant flow of good stuff coming out there. So I would encourage people to check it out.

Anything we've missed? Anything else we need to add about this wingspouse concept? A new idea but a really interesting idea, I think.

Kathi Browne: Well, I would like to add that if anyone is considering this alternative career, go to my site and see what it's all about. And don't be shy about contacting me because I do get a lot of e-mails privately and that's okay to just kind of feel it out. And just see what's out there for you. And it's really amazing what it does for the marriage and what it does for the person.

Lee Rosen: Terrific. Well, Kathi, thank you so much for joining us and being a part of our show. I appreciate you being here today.

Kathi Browne: Thank you, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You can find out a lot more about Kathi and you can learn a whole heck of a lot at her website at wingspouse.com. Take a look at it. I think you will find some valuable material there. And obviously Kathi's very engaged with the speaking and the workshops; all of that is stuff you might want to consider.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I would love to hear your feedback about this show and all of our shows. We love to get feedback from you and hear your suggestions for upcoming episodes. And so in order to do that we have a comment line set up for you at (919) 256-3083. You can of course e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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