

Dawn Sweeney

The Homerun Hitter

More than 400 baskets of strawberries. That's how much produce Dawn Sweeney collected from her family's 40-acre farm the summer she was twelve, a mad sprint to earn as much spending money as possible in advance of a family trip to Nova Scotia, where her grandfather was from. "We grew all kinds of vegetables that we sold at our roadside stand, but strawberries were my thing," she remembers. "I made five cents a basket. Nickel by nickel, I was able to save \$18, plus enough to buy a little, patent leather, orange purse to carry it in."

When the family crossed the border, Dawn was delighted by the magic of the international monetary system. Her \$18 transformed into nearly \$22. But she soon discovered a different kind of magic—one that wouldn't fade with time. As they traveled around, visiting her grandfather's twelve brothers and sisters for the first time, she saw that many of them were living in impoverished conditions. Over the course of the two-week trip, she left every cent of her earnings hidden in various places around the homes of those relatives in need. In her quiet act of philanthropy, Dawn discovered joy.

"When my father realized what I was doing, he cried," she says. "It was one of only two or three times I saw him cry in my whole life. He knew how hard I'd worked for that money, but we knew our relatives needed it far more than we did. It was a defining moment because it was so clear to me what I needed to do, and because it made me so happy to do it. It wasn't about recognition or presentation. I just wanted to help."

Dawn hit homeruns like that all through her formative years, but didn't think of them as such until decades later. Then, in 1997, she attended a particularly impactful staff meeting where her CEO went around the table clarifying everyone's roles. "When he got to me, I was surprised when he said he was counting on me to

hit a homerun every single time I stepped up to the plate," she recounts. "I'd always wanted to be successful and deliver, but his words completely reoriented me."

The impact of his words were, in part, his belief in her—a confidence demonstrated by his ability to envision greatness for her, even before she saw it for herself. It also came from her own willingness to give everything she had. "I started putting power behind everything I did in a different way because the goal was no longer just 'not striking out,'" she says.

Now President and CEO of the National Restaurant Association (NRA), the largest national advocacy and business services support organization for the U.S. restaurant industry, Dawn's career has spanned four industries and myriad roles. But in each case, guided by her lifelong commitment to make a difference, she's always swung for the fences. "If your intention is to hit a homerun every time, everywhere you go, in everything you do, no matter who

you're with, you'll do much better than you would otherwise," she affirms. "It's changed my entire life, professionally and personally."

Launched in Missouri in 1919 to tackle local restaurateur concerns about the price of eggs, the NRA today is a trade association representing an \$800 billion industry that employs 14.7 million people—10 percent of the nation's workforce. From the smallest individual shops to the largest chains, it has partnership relationships with 50 state associations, and represents those organizations and members at the federal level. It also has a \$10 million foundation dedicated to providing scholarships to underserved populations, and keeps an eye toward the international stage. "Our association is focused on promoting, protecting, advancing, and advocating for the restaurant industry domestically, so most of our work is in the U.S. market, but we also do a lot



of global work with our counterparts in other countries," Dawn says. "Trends in other parts of the world often make their way here, so that global exchange is important."

When Dawn joined the NRA in the fall of 2007, it was a \$50 million organization with 400,000 restaurant members. It has since grown to \$120 million in revenues and represents 650,000 of the million restaurants in the U.S. today. It clocks in at one of the twenty largest trade associations in the country and has an impressive board of almost 100 visionaries representing the diverse breadth of the sector. With many different business models in the industry, each one comes with his or her own policy considerations, and the NRA strives to tackle the issues that tie the whole industry together.

With a staff of 325 people spread across offices in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Orlando, Lansing, and Rhode Island, the NRA's advocacy work is supplemented by funds earned from a large annual trade show, training and certification programs on food safety, a health-insurance plan product created specifically for restaurant employees, and several other business subsidiaries. "I'm grateful that my work in trade associations has always been so business-oriented," Dawn remarks. "I love doing business in a mission-oriented organization, but the most rewarding part of the work is the people that make up the industry. They are incredibly creative, hardworking, persistent, kind, community-oriented people, and I love them. They're why I decided to come to the NRA in the first place."

Dawn spent her childhood years surrounded by people of just that caliber. Growing up in Westbrook, a community-oriented paper mill town near Portland, Maine, she was raised in the 200-year-old farmhouse where her father was born. Her mother was one of twelve, with lots of relatives living nearby throughout Dawn's childhood. Thanks to their remarkable work ethics, her parents were solidly middle class. Her beloved father, a reserved and dependable accountant at a local dairy company, would come home to work on the farm each night. He also served as a city councilman and mayor of the town. "He absolutely taught me what unconditional love was," Dawn says. "That was a huge blessing."

Her mother, very outgoing and personable, was more achievement-oriented. She also was a role model as a pillar of responsibility

and self-sacrificing care for others. "I watched her do so much for so many people, always," Dawn recounts. "Her sister had a stroke when I was 10, and she devoted her life to taking care of her. She was always stepping in and stepping up."

On the farm, the family grew corn, peas, strawberries, potatoes, and other vegetables, and raised cattle for meat. "When my brother and I discovered what was going on with the cattle, we started a campaign with paper airplanes to stop selling the animals for meat," she laughs. "He also had oxen, which he used for ox-pulling competitions at fairs. We had one of the first old-fashioned movie cameras, and based on the footage filmed, it seemed that he much preferred filming the oxen pulls to filming us kids."

Dawn's brother worked the farm chores, while she took responsibility for picking the vegetables and running a roadside stand. Her grandfather, the hardworking driving force behind the whole venture, insisted each vegetable had to be "merchandised," and inspected. If they weren't just right, they weren't sold. Under this banner of excellence, Dawn would answer the phone, take the orders, and calculate the payments. "I honestly did not know what a weekend was until I went to college," she avows. "I had no concept of what it was to take a day off. We never took vacation and I was paid only when I picked the strawberry baskets. Everything else was just us pitching in to help the family."

When she wasn't working, Dawn read voraciously. She made her own library, forcing her parents to check out books and pay a fine if they forgot to return them on time. Dawn and her brother attended public school, where she worked incredibly hard and got excellent grades. She was never much of an athlete, but she still remembers vividly an intramural basketball game in which she saw one of her own teammates trip another teammate, just so she could steal the ball and make the basket herself.

"We ended up making a comeback to win that game against one of our biggest rivals, but I walked off the court with a profound feeling that we had lost," Dawn recalls. "I was so troubled by what I had seen. It was the moment I decided I only wanted to be on teams with people I could trust and respect. Now that I'm in a position of leadership, I'm privileged to have the opportunity to choose who's on my team, and I make a point to surround myself with people I trust and respect."

Now, if I ever see teammates tripping each other intentionally in the workplace, I call it out because I believe that's one of the worst, most destructive things you can do."

Socially, Dawn was never cliquey and made a point to get along with everyone. Devoted to marching band in high school, she remembers the incredible feeling of taking a bus all the way to Florida with her team to compete in the national championships. "We were from this little town, and no one thought we had it in us, but we rallied and won!" she remembers.

No one in Dawn's extended family had ever gone to college, and when it came time to consider schools, her parents didn't know how to guide her in getting the right experiences or navigating the application process. Still, her family's help was invaluable in other ways. "My parents always insisted that I'd go to college one day," she says. "They saved for years to pay for it, with my father plowing snow in the winter or buying small houses to rent out. Even with all their ventures combined, my parents never made much, but they were incredible savers. They also gave me the most important thing of all—an unyielding work ethic."

Part of that meant working 25 hours a week at the local grocery store while in high school, starting as a bagger and working her way up to office manager for the evening shift. She also applied her work ethic academically, signing up for the honors track and excelling in every class except physics. Despite taking the most rigorous course load available, she realized she was far behind her peers when she enrolled at Colby College. Many of the other students had attended private schools, so she kicked it into high gear to meet the goals she set for herself.

Each semester, Dawn remembers going to the admissions office to sign up for classes, where the students had two lines to stand in—one for those whose tuition was already paid, and another for those whose tuition was outstanding. "Every single semester, I stood in the first line because I knew my father had paid it," she recalls. "That was such a gift. Many of my friends were far better off than we were financially, but still had to stand in the other line." My parents prioritized education. By the last year, Dawn was a resident assistant in her dorm. Her room and board was free, and she arranged to cover the rest of her tuition herself to take the burden off her parents.

In college, Dawn got involved in humanitarian organizations like Oxfam. She graduated in 1981 with a major in government and moved to Washington, D.C., where she had spent one of her junior year semesters. She landed a job at the International Dairy Foods Association, the trade association for the dairy processing industry, and spent several years saving money for law school while working as an education coordinator, a lobbyist, and then in public affairs. Then, her boss offered to send her to business school if she promised to stay on for four years after completing her degree. She agreed and spent the next four years working full-time during the day while taking classes at night at George Washington University.

As soon as she completed her MBA, Dawn took on a project that turned into the "milk moustache" advertising campaign—a tremendous opportunity. Also around that time, she attended a Leap Day party and met Tim, the man who became her husband. He helped her make the decision to pursue new professional experiences after 13 wonderful years at IDFA. She left in 1994 to become the head of marketing and business development for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. There, she pulled off a remarkable feat and raised nearly \$50 million in less than a year allowing the organization to build a national brand. Then in 1999, she was recruited to join AARP. There, she revitalized the organization's brand and expanded and diversified its membership. Over the next ten years, she succeeded in reinventing the brand, growing its reach from 30 million to 42 million members.

Through that time, Dawn and Tim had their son, Kevin, who was born happy and healthy in 1998. Their second child, Allison, came three years later. Born with Down syndrome and a hole in her heart, she was not so lucky. She had open-heart surgery when she was 9 months old, and at 13 months, complications from a different procedure grew gravely serious. "That was a major defining moment in our lives," Dawn remembers. "Nothing else even comes close. She died in my arms and I had to make the decision to turn off life support. The nurse told me that my choice was the true definition of love—to love someone so much that I could put away my need for her to live and acknowledge her need to go. As hard as it was, I was able to do that."

After Allison had gone, Dawn and Tim sat in the hospital room for five precious hours with their daughter. They then braved the unspeakably painful challenge of navigating “Life After,” coping with their own grief while helping 4-year-old Kevin through his. And, while a staggeringly high number of marriages fail after the loss of a child, Dawn and Tim vowed to come through stronger than ever. The following May, on Mother’s Day, they drove to West Virginia together with their son and bought 20 acres of land, where they built a cabin over the next 18 months. It was a labor of love in honor of their daughter, and a beautiful, restorative place that contributed to their healing and closeness as a family. “Tim is my rock and confidant in every way, both in business and in life,” she says. “He’s authentically clear on what’s right and wrong, and is a perfectly calm, solid balance to my driven, intense demeanor.” Allison’s death also inspired Dawn to get involved with Save the Children, a global humanitarian organization where she currently serves as Vice Chair of the Board. And among other philanthropic work, Dawn and Tim endow the Sweeney Family Foundation, granting special scholarships to kids with disabilities.

When Dawn worked at AARP, she loved the organization and was on the shortlist to become its future CEO. But then she received a call from a recruiter for the NRA. She told them she wasn’t interested, but they convinced her to meet with them so they could get a sense of the skills they should be looking for. “It wasn’t technically an interview, so I was very comfortable with the conversation,” she says. “Unbeknownst to me, they had been interviewing people for many months—impressive candidates like Members of Congress and former cabinet secretaries—and were looking for a hospitality gene in addition to many other qualities.”

After learning more about the potential impact she could have working to represent the second-largest private-sector employer in America, touching everything from nutrition standards to education, she ultimately went all in and accepted the position. Because she had never worked in a restaurant growing up, she spent several days each month of that first year filling various positions in the industry. From hostess, to bartender, to prep

cook, to dishwasher, to drive-through attendant, she learned the issues from the inside out. “I never worked so hard in my life,” she says.

Now, as the NRA’s first-ever woman CEO and its longest-serving in 98 years of operation, Dawn advises young people entering the working world today to develop their own authentic style. “Figure out who you are and where your guardrails are,” she says. “What’s important to you? What will you let slip? What will you never allow to happen? This is your compass. Then do the best you can to make your life decisions based on those guiding principles.”

That philosophy has been instrumental in landing her on *Washingtonian Magazine’s* list of the 10 most powerful people in Washington and on a nationwide list of the 15 most powerful people in food, as well as the great honor of being named the Association TRENDS Association Executive of the Year. Each recognition, and every other homerun she’s hit along the way, stems back to her patient, unwavering commitment to the Japanese principle of *kaizen*, or continuous improvement. As a leader, Dawn embraces it in every element of her life, striving to do things a little bit better each day. “If you can do that, you’ll wake up in three years and be a lot better,” she says. “In life, we can’t always be *the* best, but we can be *our* best. Ultimately, that’s the most important homerun of all.”

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