

Leslie Barron

A Heart for Paws and People

Sitting beside her brother in a tiny red wagon with her older sister walking alongside, Leslie Barron remembers her mother walking her children to the voting booth. Regardless of her husband's discouragement, Leslie's mother recognized that her vote mattered. The 1960s was a time of change and empowerment for women, and Leslie's mother knew she too had the right to have her voice heard. Leslie recounts, "My mother was a pioneer in that way. After divorcing my father she became a single mother of three children during a time that was very hard for a woman to do that." For Leslie, her mother's unwavering determination would give her encouragement to be self-reliant. "She taught me to be independent and instilled a strong work ethic in me," Leslie says. "She wanted me to shoot for the stars."

While her mother was often working three jobs to support her children, Leslie's sister, Laura, acted as a caregiver for her younger siblings. "Laura was like a second mom to me," Leslie says. "She was my guardian angel to make sure I was on the right path." After her mother's death fifteen years ago, Leslie's beloved sister also passed away in 2010. Now, Leslie is reminded of her mother and sister each time she enters her dining room. "I now have these little ceramic pigs," she says. "They are not worth anything of material value but they mean the world to me. They are a part of me." Leslie explains that the pigs originally belonged to her grandmother and were passed to her mother and sister before making their way to her home. "When I was little my mom would tell us to be very careful not to break them as we pulled a cookie out of them," she recalls. "We would only use them during the holidays and that was so special."

Leslie, a self-proclaimed "dog-lady," knows that her mother and sister would be proud of her and the business she helped create. Leslie is



the Co-Owner and Co-Founder of Woofie's alongside her neighbor and friend, Amy Reed. Leslie recounts the evening that Amy and she began discussing the business saying, "My mother had just passed away and I was wondering if there was something more to life than sitting in traffic to commute to work and missing out on my child's life." She says later in the conversation, "I was describing a negative experience I had with a pet sitting service and said if it was my business I would run it differently." Now fourteen years later, Leslie and Amy have created a pet sitting business and partnership that is not only financially successful but also rewarding. Leslie recounts, "Before we started the business, I was dog sitting for my friends and neighbors for free. I love animals and enjoyed filling my house with my four-legged friends."

Leslie and Amy wanted to grow Woofie's over time, and recognized that starting out slowly would be important so they could learn every detail of the business and have a personal connection with the clients and the pets. During their first year they worked together to build those client relationships and took care of all the pets themselves. "We worked from 5:00 AM to 10:00 PM almost everyday and put our blood, sweat, and tears into building the company." Leslie explains that when they started Woofie's, pet sitting was a luxury for many people. "We came into Ashburn at the perfect time, because that was when many government workers began moving to the area and commuting to work," she explains. "They needed someone to walk their dogs at midday or watch their pets while they were away for business." Leslie recalls the early days of working out of their homes, using Excel spreadsheets to track their walks and using Word documents to manually create their invoices.

Now Woofie's has an office location in

Ashburn, Virginia and employs over 100 pet sitters, 12 mobile groomers and 15 back-office administrative staff. When clients need to go away for travel, Woofie's also offers a bed and biscuit program for sitters to care for pets in their own homes until the owner returns. This connection with clients comes naturally for Leslie, as she is passionate about serving and helping others. Leslie exclaims, "We have developed a beautiful relationship with everyone and people really trust us." She says, "At first Amy and I did everything by ourselves, but now we have an incredible team who we trust completely."

Leslie, her older sister, and younger brother were born in California. When Leslie was five years old, her mother and father decided to divorce and her mother moved her and her siblings to Hastings, Nebraska where they could be closer to family. "I can remember my mother packing up our Rambler, and driving us across the country to our new home," Leslie recalls. "She did not have any money or even a credit card, but knew that it would be okay." Leslie says that although her father remained in California, she and her siblings maintained contact with him while they were growing up.

Without an education, Leslie's mother worked multiple jobs and also cleaned houses on her days off work to provide for her children. Leslie says, "She was not always there for hugs and kisses, but she made sure that we looked nice for school with our hair brushed and clean clothes." When Leslie and her siblings were out of grade school her mother went back to school and earned a nursing degree. Leslie laughs saying, "My mom would tell us to spend our money wisely but once she got a credit card she would say, 'Honey, if you can't afford it, charge it.'" Remembering her mother's personality, Leslie recalls that her mother was very nice, but there was a bitterness that came from not living the life she thought she would. "It was this bitterness in her that made me decide that I wanted to look for the positive in life and the good in people," Leslie says.

Her mother's fortitude and strong work ethic was successful in providing a childhood that Leslie describes as lean but idyllic. Their home was within walking distance to school and she spent the weekends and summers with her cousins and siblings. "I played with my friends and had slumber parties," Leslie says. "I was nice to everyone. I just wanted to be friends with

everybody." She fondly remembers being in their small home during the winter and playfully fighting with her siblings over who could sit on the living room furnace vent to get more heat. She says, "We were close and had a great time together."

Leslie explains that her older sister and younger brother excelled academically naturally, while she needed to work harder in school to thrive. She says, "I remember my eighth grade math teacher Mr. Rupert. He was a very kind man. He recognized how hard I tried and how important it was to me that I did well." Leslie was very involved in junior high activities. She acted in school plays, served on the Student Council, wrote for the school newspaper, and participated in the marching band. "I was always doing something, because my mom would always tell us we had to be active at all times," she says.

Leslie also has fond memories of working from a very young age and earning money. "I had a paper route and I delivered papers on my Schwinn bike and I would also babysit," she says. "When I was in the fifth grade I remember a truck picking us up and taking us to a farm where we detasseled corn." Once Leslie graduated from high school she was ready to explore the world. "I wanted to be a flight attendant, or work at Disney World or on a cruise ship because I loved being around people." However rather than traveling the world, Leslie joined her friends and decided to attend college at the University of Nebraska.

While in college, Leslie worked many different jobs to afford her living and tuition expenses. "When I moved to Lincoln for school I was on my own financially," she says. "I worked at a grocery store, in retail, and I worked my first office job for AC Nielson doing T.V. ratings." Leslie remarks that she even gave plasma each week for grocery money. During her third year of college Leslie met her now husband, Scott. They met at a bar while she was celebrating a friend's birthday and he was being congratulated for his acceptance into Optometry school at Ohio State University. "People say that opposites attract, but Scott and I are very similar and we knew the night we met that we were going to get married," she says. Leslie says that she and Scott grew up with similar family dynamics and both have a strong work ethic. She describes him as Cliff Clavin from the television show *Cheers* because of his warm and open demeanor. "Scott would have a beer

with anyone and would give them the shirt off his back," Leslie says.

When Scott moved to attend Ohio State, Leslie decided to leave school so she could support him while he was in school. "We got married so young," she says. "We had no money so a night out for us was getting a six-pack of beer and a small pizza." She says that while she worked during the day and Scott was in class, the two of them also worked together at night and on the weekends for a moving company and cleaning service. Leslie explains that while she did not get a college degree, she feels it was a choice she made that has led her to where she is today. "My one regret in life is not getting a degree, but it turned out great because my husband and I have a wonderful life together and I'm now the co-owner of a successful business. Building a business from scratch is the best degree one can ever receive!"

During this time Leslie worked in a hospital in the OB/GYN's office as an office and nursing assistant in Ohio. Almost twenty years later in Virginia, Leslie would discover that her new friend and neighbor Amy Reed was delivered in that same hospital by one of the doctors that Leslie worked under. She exclaims, "It was fate that Amy and I would end up working together." Once Scott graduated school in 1988, he, Leslie, and their dog packed what they owned into a U-Haul and moved to Virginia. They were married for ten years before having their son, Connor. "We have been married for 35 years and could not be happier," Leslie says. Today Scott works for a well-established Optometry practice and their son is embarking on his next career steps after completing his college degree.

For Leslie, Woofie's is the job she dreamed of. She says, "I love going to work in the morning and everyday is like a new job because we never know what is going to happen next." At Woofie's, Leslie manages the staff and sitters saying, "I make sure everyone is where they need to be and they are working so that things are done in a timely fashion." Leslie describes Woofie's as a family environment where everyone loves coming to work. "I want our company to be a happy, productive work environment," Leslie explains. "When you start your own business you become responsible for managing people. So I go to bed at night thinking about whether everyone is happy at Woofie's and what I can do to always make it better."

Leslie describes her partnership with Amy as a connection that is almost like a second marriage. "We are so different and yet so alike in so many ways. Amy is more business minded and taught me so much, while I have taught her patience and other things." Leslie says that she runs the day-to-day operations, while Amy manages the business aspects and growth of Woofie's including their current expansion into franchising. Leslie recalls that when they first started the business it was a challenge for her to require payment for pet sitting from those friends who she previously served for free. She says, "Amy reminded me that we are a business, and helped me recognize that pet sitting was no longer just a hobby for me." Leslie also says, "We are always thinking about the future and instead of taking large paychecks, Amy and I invest everything we can into the growth of the business. We employ a lot of people at this point and we take that very seriously."

Woofie's has been recognized locally and nationally as a phenomenal business. She recalls when Barbara Harrison from NBC4 Washington came to Ashburn to work alongside them as a dog walker for a day. She also remembers when they auditioned for the television show, *Shark Tank* saying, "When we auditioned for *Shark Tank*, we made it all the way to the final round but they ended up looking for products rather than services, so in hindsight I am glad we did not make it on the show." The U.S. Chamber of Commerce also named Woofie's as a Top 100 Small Business in the U.S. in 2015. While Leslie admits that Woofie's has earned several awards over the years, she says that being named Best of Loudoun by the Loudoun Times-Mirror is for her, their most rewarding accomplishment. "Because it is our neighbors, clients, and community voting, it means that they like us and trust us so it truly means the world to me," she says.

As a leader and business owner, Leslie enjoys going into middle and high schools to speak with students about following their dreams. In high school, Leslie remembers an encouraging moment from her Marketing and DECA teacher. She says, "I was telling my teacher that I really wanted to manage my own business one day and she told me that I could do anything." For Leslie, this supportive statement still rings true and she encourages students to believe in themselves and develop a strong work ethic early on. She tells

students and young adults to remember that everyone starts somewhere and that starting at a lower level and working upwards is something to be proud of. Leslie says, "Follow your dreams, because anyone can own their own business if they work hard enough." Leslie is honored to do this work and says, "It has been the best ride I have ever been on and I am happy, happy, happy!"

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