

Bill Spring - Writing Samples

Pieces written for The Fine Living Network/Scripps Howard News Syndicate as part of a regular column on “radical” career changes

“From paralegal to paradise”

Sierra Goodman went from drowning in a sea of paperwork to swimming in an ocean of dolphins. Once a stressed-out paralegal, she now owns and runs a thriving vacation destination and scientific research foundation in Costa Rica, where having fun goes hand in hand with preserving the environment.

It all started with a love of animals. When Goodman was growing up in Orange County, Calif., her family had cats and dogs.

"I wanted to be a veterinarian until I realized that this meant operations and blood!" she says. "I'm not sure when my dolphin and whale craze came about, but as I got older I started to collect little trinkets with dolphins and whales on them."

Goodman graduated from high school in 1982 and decided that she "wasn't the degree type." She liked learning on the job and chose to work as a paralegal for her father, an attorney.

But Goodman was also a dedicated environmentalist and this passion led her in 1989 to open a local chapter of EarthSave, a group that focuses on how our eating habits affect the planet. She did this for three years before a broken ankle forced her to slow down.

At first the injury seemed like a setback because Goodman had left paralegal work to run the EarthSave organization full-time in Santa Cruz, Calif. Being immobile for six weeks meant that she could not commit to the job, so Goodman did some soul searching instead. One of the books she read was about communication between dolphins and humans, and she knew she had to experience this first-hand.

She returned to paralegal work - hours of paperwork, typing and extreme attention to detail. Although the work was not satisfying, it literally paid off. She received an unexpected \$500 bonus that allowed her to take a life-altering trip to the Bahamas to swim with dolphins.

"When I finally saw the dolphins on the fourth day of the trip, my whole body felt a change. I felt that I found my family and my home and that my soul was complete."

After this her heart and mind were no longer on paralegal work. With the blessing of a supportive boss, Goodman, still based in California, started a side business booking dolphin trips in the Bahamas.

Opportunities to pursue her dream continued to present themselves to Goodman. In March 1998 a Florida boat captain asked her to coordinate dolphin tours. She left her full-time job security to pursue the touring business in Florida full time. But the biggest changes in her life had yet to occur.

Later in 1998 she took a trip to Drake Bay, Costa Rica, and fell in love with the remote, pristine area, with its lush rainforests, spectacular Pacific coastline and plentiful wildlife. While there she read an article discussing the untapped niche of dolphin and whale touring in the area and wondered if she could pull it off.

Then, on her trip home to the States, she coincidentally shared a Miami airport tram with the president of the Dolphin Foundation of Costa Rica.

Goodman relocated to Costa Rica and found a beautiful piece of coastal land for sale. After scrambling for a down payment, she convinced the owners to accept her offer over one from higher bidder. "When they decided to sell it to me," she explains, "they told me it was because of my plans for the dolphins."

Starting with a tent camp, she and her crew gradually built a fully functioning eco-lodge called Delfin Amor - "dolphin love" in Spanish - that rests between the jungle and the beach and is accessible only by boat. She and her employees now play host to travelers who come to swim and interact with the dolphins and live among the monkeys, toucans, macaws and other native creatures of the rainforest.

But Goodman's life is about much more than tourism. Now she's president of the Costa Rica Dolphin Foundation and is dedicated to studying and preserving the dolphins, whales and other species of the area.

Delfin Amor Eco Lodge also hosts scientists, assisting them with research, and often involves guests in the process. The scientists get help with their studies and the tourists come away with a greater appreciation of the wonder and fragility of nature.

As Goodman puts it, her journey has been "from paralegal to paradise," and every aspect of her new life brings her true joy. "I have followed my dreams and have been rewarded a thousand times over for taking the leaps of faith I have taken."

Each time she swims with the dolphins she knows she's swimming in the right direction.

“Event planner loves freedom from glass ceilings”

As a publicity assistant at big Hollywood film studios, Cynthia Tucker knew that she faced a glass ceiling. Today, as the owner of her own wedding- and event-planning company, Ladybug Productions, Tucker can climb as high as her creativity, business sense and personal aspirations will allow.

Growing up in the 1970s and '80s, the L.A. native dreamed of being a Hollywood publicist just like her Aunt Roz Stevenson, who worked for Universal Pictures.

"I thought it was so glamorous and so wonderful," Tucker remembers.

With her aunt's guidance, Tucker went to the University of California-Santa Barbara and majored in communications and African-American studies. She also completed a summer internship in a public-relations firm.

After graduation in December 1994, Tucker landed a job at the Walt Disney Co., assisting the head of the international home-video publicity division. While she loved her day-to-day duties, including researching the history of Disney characters, she most enjoyed planning special publicity events. It tapped into the joy she felt as a child, organizing events like her Girl Scout troop's annual cookie drive.

In 1995, while at Disney, Tucker met Lynn Allen Jeter, who owned her own special-events and public-relations company.

"I thought, 'Oh, my gosh!' People get paid to do what I just love to do," Tucker says. She had a two-year unpaid internship with Jeter, learning the ins and outs of the business while also working 40-hour weeks at Disney.

Tucker knew it was time to leave Disney in 1998, when her boss told her that promotion within the department would not be possible. She moved to upstart studio DreamWorks SKG, working as an assistant to publicist Joyce Simpson.

Three months later, Simpson decided to move back East but was determined to help Tucker get another position at DreamWorks. She mentioned an opening in the special-events department. "My eyes lit up," remembers Tucker. "I said, 'I would love a chance to do this.'"

Soon Tucker was helping Chip Sullivan, who ran the department, organize a three-day retreat for studio division heads.

"He was testing me out on my knowledge of how to run an event," she says. She passed with flying colors and was soon one of three event coordinators in the department, where she stayed for three years.

Although she was good at her job, Tucker knew that something wasn't quite right.

"I had headaches, my stomach was tight . . . the typical feeling of people not wanting to go to work," she says.

"I knew, going back to high school, that I wanted to run my own company," she says. The only question was when was she going to strike out on her own. The answer came to her in church.

In Tucker's church, the month of June is reserved for special prayers, and in June 2000, Tucker chose to pray for career guidance.

"It was the third Sunday of that month where tears came to my eyes, and I feel that God spoke to me," she says.

The message was clear to her: She was to start setting money aside and start her own company in September.

"I officially started Ladybug Productions on my birthday of September 27th, 2000," she says. With DreamWorks behind her, Tucker was now head of a one-woman company.

Tucker chose the name Ladybug Productions (www.LadyBugEvents.com) at her mother's insistence. "My mother always called me 'Ladybug,' " she explains, "and she said, 'Your company should reflect who you are.'"

Aunt Roz set Tucker up with her first official paying client, the Pan-African Film Festival, held in Los Angeles. Tucker handled the festival's opening-night red-carpet gala. The evening went off without a hitch, and a series of big entertainment-industry events and smaller parties followed. She also earned her MBA.

Tucker was determined not to get into wedding planning, even though it represents a big part of the special-events industry. Not only was she accustomed to a level of freedom and control that most prospective brides are unwilling to give, she was also wary of having to hold the bride's hand through every detail of the process. But when 9/11 forced corporations to tighten budgets, Ladybug suddenly needed new revenue streams, and Tucker reversed her stance on weddings.

Luckily, her very first wedding was a lot like a big corporate event. Tucker was given carte blanche to turn an open piece of land into an elegant soiree for 400, and the evening was perfect.

Today, weddings represent about half of Tucker's business. She's found that she's as adept at handling nervous or demanding brides and grooms as she is at pleasing corporate executives.

"I love being my own boss," she says. Plans include hiring an assistant to handle errands and small details, but for now, Tucker is happy to take care of everything herself.

As she puts it, "It's the ultimate joy."

