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Top of the [title] ladder

Austin Business Journal - by [A.J. Mistretta](#) ABJ Staff

She's been a secretary and a singer, a cancer survivor and a CEO. Not to mention Miss Austin 1970 -- by default (we'll explain). But despite her prominence as chief executive of Stewart Title Austin and involvement in a plethora of organizations, Nicki Tyler is as affable and genuine as they come.

"I think I'm a unique animal," says Tyler, with her easy smile and North Texas parlance that instantly puts people at ease. "I should be an egghead with my math degree and numbers background. I bring numbers into everything because I think they tell you so much. But I'm really a people person -- I love managing people."

That Tyler herself is the 24-hour emergency contact for her company's six Austin area offices speaks volumes about this determined yet jovial professional. Surviving on just a few hours' sleep a night, her energy is boundless, allowing her to run a territory stretching from Midland to San Antonio for Stewart, sit on a number of local boards, and still find time for a hobby in videography.

Tyler's rise to power was not direct -- nor did it come easy. Born in Fort Worth to a French mother and a father in the U.S. Army Air Corps, she lived everywhere from Harlingen to the Italian coast before returning to Fort Worth when she was a teenager.

As a math major at the University of Texas in the early 1970s, she sang her way through college in local bars like the Saxon Pub and the Checkered Flag, belting out tunes by Carol King and Gordon Lightfoot among others, guitar in hand. She was second runner-up in the 1970 Miss Austin pageant (her dorm mother signed her up), but when the winner got married--a no-no--and the first runner up couldn't be found, Tyler wore the crown for several months and received scholarship money that aided her shoestring budget.

When Tyler was a senior, she contacted a cousin in Fort Worth in the entertainment business who'd promised to help her get a foot in the door as a professional singer.

"I told him 'Ok I'm ready to sing for a living.' He wrote back and said, 'That's fine, now get your degree and get a day job.' Best advice I ever had," she says with a smile. And she took it.

Tyler's first job out of college was as a receptionist in the real estate lending division at Capital National Bank. The man who headed that department, Don Harden, recalls how he just needed a secretary, but got a lot more. "There wasn't much of anything she couldn't do," says the now-retired Harden. He eventually made Tyler the manager over the personnel in his division and supported her when she wanted to pursue the bank's management training program--an almost unheard of path for a woman back then. In time, she would become a vice president with that bank before joining another in 1984 and taking a post as president of Stewart Title Austin in 1992.

"I love what I do because I love working with people," she says. "I'll never ask anyone to do something that I



Nicki Tyler; Chairman and CEO, Stewart Title Austin Inc.

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wouldn't do myself. And I think that inspires trust. ...Sure the title business is challenging, hugely challenging. But if I didn't have challenges, well I don't think I'd enjoy it."

Q: You could have wholeheartedly pursued a career in music. Do you regret not doing that?

A: Tyler says she doesn't have many regrets in life. As for singing, she's performed at numerous events through the years, but she's glad all of her energy didn't go there. Her mother passed away from thyroid cancer several years ago and, in 2002, Tyler herself underwent surgery for the same dreaded disease. The surgery affected her vocal chords and drastically reduced her range. Happy to be cancer free for five years now, Tyler says she still misses her voice dearly. "There was a time when I couldn't talk about the fact that I couldn't sing; it was very upsetting."

Q: Was it difficult to work your way up to this position as a woman?

A: Tyler points out that while the upper echelons of both the banking and title industry have traditionally been mostly male, many of the actual workers in both businesses are female. "I've never been intimidated," says Tyler. "I treat everyone with respect, and I tell my people, work hard and earn your keep. You have to be upfront, straightforward and assert yourself." Tyler says while she doesn't like to generalize, she's noticed that women tend to be better multi-taskers and more detail-oriented than men in business. But they often falter when it comes to relationship building -- particularly in industries like commercial real estate that still have a "good old boy" feel. "I don't ever try to be one of the guys, but if someone asks me to go hunting, I'll go," she says. "Those types of activities, they help build camaraderie and relationships."

Q: What are the challenges right now in the title business?

A: The fees title companies charge their customers are set by the state, and Tyler says in the 15 years she's worked in the business, there's never been a rate increase. In fact, the fees keep getting reduced as regulators with the Texas Department of Insurance seek out potential fluff in the business. But the cost of manpower, which accounts for about 60 percent of a title company's overhead, keeps going up. "We've got less money to work with and we're having to be that much more efficient," she says.

Meanwhile, there's been a surge in new title companies in the local market in the last two years, from 18 to more than 37 in Travis County alone, as a growing field attempts to capitalize on the region's influx of real estate capital. That expansion of the ranks has put pressure on title companies to maintain their business, but Tyler says it won't last forever. "I think it's only a matter of time before we see constriction in the number of title companies."

Q: You're one of the founding members and current president of the Austin chapter of Commercial Real Estate Women. Why is that group important?

A: "It's my good old-boy-network. I don't know how else to say it." Tyler says what she loves best about CREW is that its 90-plus members -- all principals with their respective companies -- consistently strive to work with each other. "We recognize the importance of supporting one another in business," she says. "CREW has been a wonderful breakthrough ... It's a great avenue for women in this business to build relationships."

In Detail

Family: Husband, Ronnie. Children, Jaime, 28; Heather, 26

Work history: Capital National Bank, (now JP Morgan Chase), where she became a vice president; senior vice president with Republic Bank (now Bank of America); president of Stewart Title Austin; Chairman and CEO of Stewart Title Austin, San Antonio and Midland

Education: Bachelor's degree from the University of Texas; master's degree from Southwestern Graduate School of Banking at SMU