

VANESSA GREEN SINDERS

Chamber CEO Ushers in New Era

By Rebecca Patrick



People often tell you glowing things about someone you are about to meet. The portrayal can sound too good to be true.

“You’ll like her – once you talk with her for a few minutes, it’s like you’ve known her a long time.”

That’s what then-Indiana Chamber Board Chairman Paul Perkins told me about our soon-to-be-announced new president and CEO Vanessa Green Sinders in September.

Sure enough, when I spoke with her later that day, Perkins was exactly right.

Positive, energetic and disarming, Sinders is now leading the organization into its next 100 years with a focus that puts collaboration at the core of everything.

Her path to the Indiana Chamber is owed in no small part to marrying a Hoosier, Paul “Chip” Sinders, a native of Clay City, whom she met while both were working in Washington D.C. for two U.S. senators. Her Judd Gregg of New Hampshire and him Indiana icon Richard Lugar.

Besides holding key positions on Capitol Hill, she’s a former Fortune 100 executive for Charter Communications/Spectrum.

In this conversation, the Indiana Chamber’s first female president shares her journey – the people, places and philosophies that have shaped her.

BizVoice®: Tell us about your upbringing.

Vanessa Green Sinders: “I grew up in a small town, Stow, Massachusetts, and often tell people that it was filled with apple orchards and a few houses. I spent my entire childhood there and went to the local public school, then to a regional high school. Our town wasn’t even big enough to have its own high school.

“I have one sibling, a brother who is six years younger than me, and he lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and two little kids. My parents grew up on the East Coast and settled in Massachusetts. My dad built houses and did renovations for a living, owning his own small business. When I was growing up, my mom was at home with us and also an editor and worked for a local newspaper. So, I credit her with my grammar skills.”

BV: What did a young Vanessa envision for her future? When did your career goals come into focus?

VGS: “As a kid, I have a recollection of doing a school report on former congresswoman Pat Schroeder from Colorado, who was a trailblazer for women and being in Congress.



Female members of the Indiana Chamber Board of Directors heralded the arrival of Vanessa Green Sinders with a reception in the fall. Among those welcoming her are Indiana State University President Deborah Curtis (left) and Marilyn Moran-Townsend (right), CEO of CVC Communications in Fort Wayne and the first woman to lead the Indiana Chamber Board.

I thought, ‘Wow, it would be really cool to do something like that, to be involved in your community, in politics, make a difference in that way.’

“As a young girl, it was really exciting to be able to learn about someone else who paved the way for doing that kind of thing. Also, while I had an idea of wanting to go into politics and public service, at that time I was also really interested in business.

“I don’t know if you remember the movie *Baby Boom* (starring Diane Keaton, 1987), but it was about a woman who was this high-powered executive in New York who ended up with a kid and moving to Vermont and running her own business. That whole story really resonated with me – that I can do something like that. Whether you’re working at a big company or running your own business, or doing something else entirely, you can do whatever you put your mind to.

“When I think back on my childhood, those examples really shaped my desire to be impactful and make a difference with my career.”

BV: Your parents visited the office in November and you can tell they are very proud. How did they influence your outlook on life?

VGS: “My parents were always very supportive of me forging my own path in the world and doing new things. They really pushed me to get outside my comfort zone and try new things.

“My first job after college was working in Chicago, where I didn’t know anyone

except for a couple of the other financial analysts at Jones Lang LaSalle where I was working, who I had interviewed with. Those were the only connections I had in the city. My parents drove me out to Chicago in a U-Haul, and I remember when they were driving away thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, what have I done with my life? I know no one in this city. I’m starting a new job. What is happening?’ I was 22, but it was the best experience. Yes, that first week or two were really hard, but then I got on with it. I had to make friends, I had to network, I had to make connections. I started getting into my job, really liking that, and it was an awesome experience and a year that I wouldn’t have traded. It made me have the confidence to know that I can do whatever I want if I put my mind to it.”

BV: Besides your parents and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, who or what inspires you?

VGS: “More recently and now, people in general inspire me. Throughout my career, I have had the honor and the opportunity to have amazing colleagues and teams that I’ve worked with and that I’ve managed and led. Being a part of those teams and helping those teams move forward individually and collectively inspires me to keep doing that and do it more and better.”

BV: What led you to the positions you had on Capitol Hill, where you worked for two U.S. senators?

VGS: “I felt like (there) you could make



Engaging with Hoosier business leaders on a listening tour and speaking at community groups across the state are top priorities for the new Chamber leader, who is putting a renewed emphasis for the organization on building and strengthening partnerships.

a real impact. It was different every day and challenging. I guess this philosophy was instilled in me by my parents – being open to trying new things. I feel like Capitol Hill is a place where you just get thrown into something and you turn around and you’re like, ‘I can’t believe I’m leading this issue or advising this senator. I’m 24 years old and how did I get here?’ But it’s an amazing experience and honor, and I had some family that lived in D.C. so when I got bitten by that bug and wanted to move there after Chicago, I just started networking through their contacts and happened into my first job, which was working for former Senator Judd Gregg from New Hampshire given my connection there; I went to Dartmouth College.

“My philosophy has always been, ‘Put your head down, do a good job, ask for more responsibility, be inquisitive and just keep being energized and excited about what’s in front of you.’ That led me into many different roles for (Senator Gregg) both on his committee staff and then helping run his D.C. office. And then he announced he was retiring. Senator Scott Brown from Massachusetts got elected in an upset. I’m from Massachusetts, so it made sense for me to transition over there.

“When I became chief of staff for Scott Brown, I was one of the youngest chiefs of staff in the Senate and he was a very high-profile member. I remember thinking to myself, ‘Wow, I have a lot to learn!’ But what did I do? I went and met with every other chief of staff who would meet with me to ask them, ‘What do I need to know? How can we work together?’ And those relationships I still have to this day and were so helpful to me. That’s how I’ve approached every job and challenge – as an opportunity and believing that I have something to bring to the table while also recognizing that other people also have something to bring to the table ... and taking advantage of what’s in front of me.

“When Senator Brown lost, I went to a nonprofit issue campaign (Campaign to Fix the Debt) to be chief of staff there before moving on to the American Hotel & Lodging Association and then Charter Spectrum. I’ve never had a five-year plan. I have always been open to new opportunities and pushed myself to consider them when they come my way, always willing to accept a new challenge.”

BV: Anything else that you took away from your time working in Congress?

VGS: “That there are really good people working on both sides of the aisle behind the scenes and in front of the cameras. Sometimes, especially in today’s world, that gets lost because that’s not what the headlines cover. I was honored to serve and to be part of that. And I hope that more people can recognize that there are people there who are trying to do the right thing and want to make a difference.”

BV: What do you think people might be surprised to learn about you?

VGS: “I ran two marathons early in my D.C. career. I ran the Marine Corps Marathon twice, two years in a row, and then decided 26.2 miles – doing it twice – was enough!”

BV: What do you like most about Indiana?

VGS: “We like a lot of things about Indiana. We have been here almost two years and have really loved every minute – my husband and I and our two boys (first and third graders). The people definitely stand out though. When we first moved here, I remember meeting our neighbors on our block in Indianapolis and how everyone came over to say, ‘Hi.’ The kids ran over and wanted to play with our kids. Everybody was open to giving us advice and ideas on schools and sports and things to do here. That’s a unique quality of Indiana where people really want to help each other. They want to engage. Coming from the East Coast where it isn’t always that way, we felt really welcomed and supported by the community. I would say that has continued. It started personally, but as I’ve transitioned into this role professionally, I have felt the exact same way that everyone has been so welcoming and excited and wanting to share their advice, thoughts and connections and ideas as we continue to work together to make the state stronger and better.”

BV: What about the Chamber and its mission resonates so much with you?

VGS: “Our mission of creating and maintaining that world-class

environment for businesses to operate and people to prosper speaks to the core of what gets me up in the morning – beyond my Orangetheory (workout); it's that desire to make a difference and be part of our community. So, for me, the Chamber is an absolutely amazing opportunity to work with such a talented team of individuals here and stakeholders across the state to try to help do that."

BV: You've said that you want to AMP things up at the Chamber. That's not just a phrase. There's some meaning behind that acronym ... explain that.

VGS: "As we move forward, I think about things in three buckets: advocacy, member engagement and partnerships, which has become, 'I want to AMP it up!' From an advocacy perspective, the Chamber does such great work at the Statehouse – with lawmakers, state agencies and the Governor's office – working on policy legislation that impacts the state. We need to continue that, prioritize the issues we work on, and elevate our voice that represents Hoosier businesses of all sizes from every county as we look to make that impact on policy.

"From a member engagement perspective,



When Sinderson and her Hoosier husband were looking to leave Washington D.C., Indiana was the natural fit. She says, "It checked all the boxes for the life we wanted for ourselves and our two young boys."

some of it goes back to advocacy and engaging with our members so as job creators they can share with legislators and other elected officials about the impact that policies and legislation have on their business and why things are a good idea or a bad idea. I also think just continuing to energize and engage our membership in all

92 counties – we are a membership organization at our core, and so always having that engagement in mind is key.

"In terms of partnerships, it's how we can build on the strong relationships that we already have with external partners and stakeholders to move the ball on these big



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president and CEO of the
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issues faster, whether it's workforce or other policy matters that are facing the state. ... How we can all come together and how the Chamber can, as the employer voice for over 4,000 member companies, over 25,000 investors, really bring that larger collective voice to the table to help move the state forward."

BV: In your new role, you're meeting with employers and individuals across the state on a listening tour. What has really hit home for you so far?

VGS: "People's excitement and engagement. Indiana is such an amazing place with so much investment, expertise and opportunity. Whether it's in the advanced manufacturing space, life sciences, biotech, FinTech, other industries across the state. There is so much going on here and I think that until you're here, sometimes you don't know about all the state has to offer."

"I feel like I have gotten a little taste of all of it as I've started my listening tour that I plan to continue this year. I believe it's so important as a leader of a statewide organization to be constantly connecting with our members and stakeholders across the state to get that feedback, to share what we are hearing and what we're working on. But what has hit home for me is just the investment and excitement and commitment of Hoosiers to continue making the state better."

BV: A year from now, what would you like to see from the Chamber?

VGS: "A year from now, we'll be at the beginning of the 2025



No matter what she's doing, you're likely going to see Sinderson full of energy. She couldn't be more excited to take the baton at the Indiana Chamber and build on its track record.

legislative session. There will be a new Governor, and it will be a budget year. There will be a real opportunity to address some of these bigger policy issues to advance economic growth and prosperity for the state, and I hope, expect and want to make sure that the Chamber is there as a collaborative, convening thought partner – working with stakeholders in and around government – to move some of those big issues forward."

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