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**BUSINESS LEADER
OF THE YEAR**

STATE OF REINVENTION

Making the Most of Her 'One Shot'

By Rebecca Patrick





In talking with Barber, she beams with enthusiasm for her next chapter, “I’m starting my own business called To the Hoop (in honor of her father’s favorite advice). ... I’ll be an advisor to Marvella – and then we’ll see where the needs are.”

Allison Barber makes no apologies.

She’s a devout optimist and loves hard work – the more the better.

When she worked in The Pentagon, which prides itself on the motto “A is for action,” she was known as the one brass turned to because she got things done.

Later in her career, she became the well-respected, sought-after executive who takes her organization to the next level.

After nine years at Western Governors University (WGU) Indiana – most notably serving as its first chancellor, starting up the online college in the state and seeing enrollment expand to every county – she received a call in 2019 to run the WNBA franchise, the Indiana Fever.

“That had never been in my sights, but I thought, ‘What if I put my hand towards something that would do more for girls and women in our city and state, and maybe help the franchise get on the path towards success again?’” Barber recalls. The lure proved irresistible.

Five years on, Barber found herself trading her “dream job with the Fever” for an even broader calling.

The Marvella project, announced in September, will be a pioneering youth sports complex in northwest Indiana to engage and empower young female athletes (and prospective leaders) across the state. It’s touted as the first of its kind in the nation.

“Something that’s never been done before excites me,” admits Barber, who is now the chair for the non-profit arm, the Marvella Foundation.

“I also love change. The energy and opportunity that comes with trying something new is exciting.”

Inspirational roots

A native of northwest Indiana, Barber spent most of her childhood in Schererville.

“All my great grandparents came to America from the Middle East (they are Assyrian). ... It’s just the beautiful immigrant story that I love. They left everything to create something better, and I’m a product of that,” she proudly states. “I’m very grateful to (them), and I’m respectful of all the people who chart a new course for their families as difficult as it is.”

Barber says she and her older sister “are thick as thieves” and went to Christian schools from third grade through college (Tennessee Temple University), where they were roommates.

“My parents were super generous. That (education) was a gift of really just growing up in a space that seemed aligned with what our values were and our opportunities,” she maintains. “It was a safe space too.”

It seems her upbringing was full of lasting inspiration.

“My dad used to say to me all the time on the basketball court, ‘Take it to the hoop, kid.’ That was always his mantra,” Barber smiles. “Even to the end of his journey (he passed away last November), I’d be leaving the house for a meeting or something and he’d say (it). What it taught me was to have a goal, to have drive.”

An early manifestation of following that advice was when Barber sold seeds door to door in grade school.

“I wanted to make enough money to buy a used car that I saw in the newspaper, not realizing that even if I made the \$1,200, I wouldn’t be able to drive the car,” she laughs. “But that didn’t matter to me. I set a goal (which her father always encouraged). And when I was in high school, I really could not wait to work.”

With a grandmother and great grandmother who taught school, education was the family business. Barber followed suit; it also fit with her “love for helping people learn and develop and grow.”

Passionate pursuits

When it comes to her husband Linden Barber, an attorney, he made a big impression on his future wife in the fourth grade. She liked the poise with which the pastor’s son delivered the Bible verse he had chosen before class started.

Allison even told her mother she was going to marry him someday. They’ve been married 35 years.

Around the time the first Gulf War broke out in 1990, Linden felt compelled to do his part.



Barber is a big proponent of trying your very best and giving back: “I love work. The harder you work, the more you accomplish and the more good you can do.” (Right) Indiana Fever great Tamika Catchings says Barber “worked tirelessly (as team president) to help grow the Fever’s brand throughout the state.”

“(One day) my husband came home and said, ‘I really would like to serve the country.’ That seemed to make sense to me too. We took a little time to figure out that there was a JAG Corps and they needed lawyers and that was the right fit for him. But we both quit our jobs and moved to the East Coast (where he was first assigned).”

Not only did Barber leave her teaching position back in Indiana but the profession entirely. She was ready for something new.

While searching for a job, Barber faced a tough period. “(With a teaching background), they put me in a box that I didn’t feel was the box I wanted to be in,” she declares. “I decided I would take every job interview I could get, so some of this was my own exploration. If I couldn’t figure out what I wanted to do, then maybe I could figure out what I didn’t want to do and back into my career.”

“I went on over 50 job interviews, door-to-door sales, car sales, acting and commercials in New York City – you name it.”

Barber found her next career move while volunteering in isolation for the Red Cross in a warehouse doing packing and shipping.

“While I was doing that, they asked me to interview to be the manager of that program, which was headquartered in Washington, D.C. So, my volunteer work – standing in a warehouse all by myself – led to a really terrific job at Red Cross headquarters. That was a dream come true,” she enthuses. “I’d been a Red Cross volunteer since I was 16. I loved the organization. I’m still a volunteer.”

Barber also left that East Coast job hunt

with a new perspective.

“I learned that when you reinvent yourself – and now I’m in my eighth career, so I’ve done a lot of reinventing – you have to have the right people on your team to support you and encourage you but also be honest.”

Washington D.C. served as fertile ground for Barber’s reinventing. After her time as public relations director for the Red Cross, she ran her own PR firm, led an advertising agency and spent seven and a half years in President George W. Bush’s administration.

She served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for internal communications and public liaison. In addition, Barber helped establish the Department’s Office of Global Communication. For her accomplishments, she was awarded the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service.

After her stint in federal government, Barber had a consulting business and was an adjunct professor at Georgetown University.

Soon, she and Linden were homeward bound.

“My husband and I decided that we would come back at some point. We knew we’d come back to be with family. One December morning, I just kind of felt God laying it on my heart that it was time. And I said to my husband, ‘I think it’s time to go.’”

Taking it all in

As Barber enjoys her stroll down memory lane, it’s evident she feels blessed.

That’s especially so when she talks about her mentors – from the very first pair to two

who are quite famous.

“I’m so grateful to my parents. I had this great blend. One parent, my dad, that said, ‘Just go for it.’ And (my mom) said, ‘Check your motives. Make sure you’re going for it for the right reasons.’”

Barber coined working at the Red Cross under two-time presidential cabinet member Elizabeth Dole as “just another gift. From her, I learned that the most important thing is to be competent and then utilize your differences to your advantage.”

The experience helped crystallize what makes Barber tick.

“(Elizabeth) set a very high standard. I realized that the bar was very high – and I liked it. She was a great role model and is still a dear friend.”

But it doesn’t seem to matter where the lesson was learned or the teacher, Barber soaked up everything she possibly could.

“Somebody taught me this rubric: There’s best in class, next in class and just good enough. Oftentimes, you can kind of put things in those categories,” she relays. That mediocre third option she quickly takes off the table.

“When I worked for (U.S. Defense) Secretary (Donald) Rumsfeld and that team, 9/11 happened, and we went from being what I thought was extremely busy to beyond busy. I mean that pace and the intensity was unprecedented. So, you want to be in the foxhole with people that don’t accept status quo (or mediocrity) in those moments,” she asserts.

“He was a good role model in that. He

drove you hard, he pushed you hard, but he respected women – and he valued hard work.”

Winning ways

Barber has been generous with what she’s learned throughout her life and career.

Teresa Lubbers has witnessed Barber’s impact from several vantage points. She headed the Indiana Commission for Higher Education when Barber was at WGU. And now, she’s the president of Sagamore Institute, where Barber is chair of the board of trustees.

It is purpose-driven leadership, Lubbers believes, that sets Barber apart and galvanizes those around her.

“She spends the time to understand a person’s life journey and helps the individual visualize ways to flourish and contribute. She models the kind of integrity and manner that she encourages in others.”

Indiana Fever legend Tamika Catchings had the opportunity to work closely with Barber from 2019 to 2022 in her front office roles for the team.

“Allison’s commitment to getting the best out of you every day is what makes her an inspiring leader. She will push buttons and is very intentional with seeing growth in her team members,” Catchings praises.

She also hails Barber as a servant leader, who is “always looking for ways to impact our communities. She’s not afraid to roll up her sleeves and get involved to make sure that everything is a success.

“We’ve done a little bit of everything together, and I truly value what Allison taught and showed me as my leader and as a friend. I’m so thankful to have her in my life.”

“(It all comes down to) I’m really motivated to figure out ways to contribute to the greater good,” Barber explains. “So, when there’s an opportunity that comes my way, if I can see that there is a way that success



Barber loves a startup and building things. So, taking on the role of chancellor at fledgling WGU Indiana was a perfect match.

of whatever that challenge is could contribute to a city, a state, individuals, then my mindset is to take on this new challenge or opportunity because it’s a way to contribute to something bigger than myself.”

Lubbers shares Barber does this “without expecting attention or accolades. . . . It might be a student who needs financial support, an emerging leader who seeks inspiration and connection or a person without a home on a holiday. Regardless of the need, Allison shows up to provide encouragement, wise counsel and care.”

Though Barber admits she says, “yes to a lot of things,” she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“There are some people that would be like, ‘You have to have time for yourself. You have to have boundaries,’ ” Barber notes. “But I don’t live that way. I’m going to slide into home base with nothing left. That’s the goal because we get one shot at this life.”

Basketball Fever

Barber played other sports – tennis and softball – in college, but her true love was basketball for one simple reason. “There’s this camaraderie of working together, and I’m better suited for a team sport as opposed to an individual sport.

“I couldn’t have defined it as a young person, but I think in life, I’ve always enjoyed trying to help people live their best life, become their best person.”

Everything came together as president of the Indiana Fever. And it allowed Barber to shine.

“When I got the job, I wrote a strategy. I wanted to build a championship culture (in every way). So, I wrote a strategy around commit, compete and contribute (to the community). The three Cs,” Barber begins. “I knew that would create a championship culture. I didn’t know if we would win a championship, but I knew that without the culture we would never win the championship.

“That has really driven the behaviors and actions of the Fever over the last five years, and I think it’s all coming together now.”

The Fever returned to the playoffs this past season and into the global basketball consciousness with its rookie phenom Caitlin Clark.

It’s so impressive, lauds Indiana Chamber President and CEO Vanessa Green Sinders, the way Barber used “her background in branding and PR to understand perception and maximize the Fever’s story.

“She led efforts that helped position the team to be able to capitalize on the unprecedented energy and excitement from drafting Caitlin Clark. And now the Fever are woven into the fabric of Indiana and beyond.”

To Barber, two leadership attributes are a must: “You’re ready and then you’re adaptable. Those things have to go together to be successful,” she conveys.

“(In this case with Clark’s arrival), it was everything from the lines are out the door, so we had to open the building sooner. The team store was overwhelmed (with record-smashing merchandise sales); we had to change the structure. You adapt. You keep iterating to meet the reality of what is unprecedented.”

Barber is quick to give credit to the Fever and Pacers Sports & Entertainment teams. “You have to have the right ticket salespeople, sponsorship people, front office people and media people. All of those things had to be in place (and they were).”

Marvella and more

The Marvella 300,000-square-foot facility is slated to open at Fair Oaks Farms in Newton County in spring 2026 with 16 courts and fields. (It’s named in honor of Indiana’s late U.S. Sen. Birch Bayh’s wife, the inspiration for his Title IX bill, passed in 1972, which bans gender discrimination in athletics and academia receiving federal funding.)

It was a call from a familiar face – Catchings, who is an advisor for Marvella – that brought Barber onto the scene.



Barber, shown taking part in the Indiana Chamber’s inaugural Women’s Summit, shares, “Sports was a safe and good space for me. I am very active and to have that outlet and to do something that is fun is welcome. I’m very motivated by things that bring enjoyment in life.”

“I met with Tamika, (Marvella founder and CEO) Glenn Tilley and a few others. I thought, ‘This is the next right thing’ ... in that we talk about this momentum, this moment in time for girls and women in sports,” Barber remarks.

“We’ll take all the learnings that we’ve had at the Fever ... from all the women who have committed honestly their entire life to promoting opportunities for girls and women. I’ve had a front row seat to meet and spend time with those champions, to learn from them and then now highlighting and bringing more attention to Indiana and the game of basketball and other sports.

“It also gets me a little bit back to my teacher roots of helping girls,” she continues. “It’s coming full circle to say a first-grade schoolteacher who’s experienced sports can bring those things together and really help girls thrive in their life now and for the future.”

Catchings offers, “Allison’s passion, dedication and fire for making a difference in our young people and community is why I thought she would be a great fit for Marvella.

“Her drive and commitment to our young people through sports, mental health and leadership allows for her mission-driven thinking to be utilized.”

Sinders underscores the significance of what Barber has taken on.

“Allison is such a big believer in developing and empowering that next generation of leaders, which is so vital for our state. I can’t wait to see the impact she is going to have on young girls with the Marvella project and all that she has in store for the future.”



CONGRATULATIONS ALLISON BARBER

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