

FIRST LADY MAUREEN BRAUN

OFFERING PEARLS OF WISDOM

By Rebecca Patrick



It's to be admired to know what you want, go after it and attain it.

Nearly 50 years ago, Maureen Braun turned her dream of being a business owner into reality with vision, hard work and family support. And she's still flourishing and taking on new adventures.

With her husband's election as Indiana Governor in November, Braun is enjoying a greater platform to be a role model for women entrepreneurs.

And at the same time, she will continue running her retail store, Finishing Touches, a Main Street fixture in her hometown of Jasper.

Braun not only embraced the four Ps of marketing – product, price, place and promotion – to great success in business, but she's also used the concept to inspire her own framework that guides her life.

Her four Ps are positive attitude, priorities, people and pay it forward and back.

"These four things help to motivate me and keep me going and what I look for when opportunities come up," Braun shares.

She puts God first, family second and work third.

Braun recently talked with *BizVoice*® about her entrepreneurial heart and stepping onto the stage as Indiana First Lady.

BV: What was your upbringing like? How did that contribute to your career path?

Maureen Braun: "I grew up in Jasper with great childhood memories, and I have three brothers and three sisters who all were

very creative, so I got to watch them all the time – see what they were doing, and it just kind of got me inspired to be creative too. I painted my own bedroom, I made my own clothes and learned from them.

"Then in high school, I worked at a movie theater and a drugstore, which was more retail and people-oriented, so I certainly enjoyed being with people.

"People forget at that time we had no girls sports in high school, so even though I worked and was a cheerleader and other things, I still had a lot of time compared to today's world. That kind of fostered the creativity for me and I knew that was an important aspect.

"My sisters were teachers, and one was a nurse, but I knew I just didn't want to follow in that direction because it just wasn't a good fit for me. That's when I decided to go into business and make that a goal."

BV: You traveled east for your early work experience. How did that impact you and ultimately what brought you and your husband back home?

MB: "We got married in 1976. That was after graduating (college), and we moved to Boston where Mike got his MBA (from Harvard Business School). But then I needed a job and got one with Filene's department store in the buying department for designer dresses. I got a good experience there on purchasing and seeing how a department store and corporation ran, but I also wanted to have some retail experience. So, the next year I went and applied at Ann Taylor (a retail clothing store for women). That was very valuable to see both sides and kind of reinforced my thoughts of having my own store. ...

"We were lured back to Jasper because Mike wanted to do his own job eventually, and we knew we wanted to raise a family near our family. We're very close to our family members, and I knew the

business market well too because we had grown up there.”

BV: How did you get your shop up and running?

MB: “While I was still in Boston, I did a business plan just in case we opened. Then when we decided to move back home, the business plan was presented to the bank and we got a loan (family co-signed). We purchased a building and that’s the beginning of it. ...

“(At the time), having graduated in ’76 and opened in ’78, I was young and kind of stupid enough to think I knew everything. That confidence I believe came through in (my) business plan.

“But I think that’s an important part that a lot of people today (don’t do). They have a passion, but they don’t go through the extra step of getting the business plan together, the financial plan, which is so important. ... The passion overrides, and they don’t really understand all the other elements that go with it.”

BV: What is it about being a business owner and particularly one in retail that you felt suited you then and now?

MB: “I knew that I loved to work with people, and I like to be on my feet. I like the variety and the challenges every day that are a little different. And I knew I did not want to be behind a desk. I’m not a person that can sit still very long. I love the flexibility also that it could provide when we wanted to start a family – my mom, in-laws and my sister helped tremendously when our children were growing up.

“That’s a big challenge for all female entrepreneurs today. It’s a very hard job to juggle all of that effectively. Through social media, people expect perfection and it’s very difficult, so I appreciated the fact that having my own store would give me a flexibility and creativity outlet. It also would give me a lot of challenges and opportunities, and I just loved home decor and interior design.

“That’s why I’m still doing it because I don’t feel like I go to work. I get to help people decorate their homes and find the perfect gifts, socialize and volunteer. It’s amazing how it worked out over all these years.”

BV: You started Finishing Touches in 1978. What were the early days like and what are the various things a person might walk in and find there?

MB: “When we opened, we had wedding registry as the biggest target market, but now we have a lot of home decor items, and then we have a lot of personal gifts and gifts that are just for men, women or children. The store has diversified a lot over the years and why we have succeeded is the fact that we keep changing.



As Maureen Braun looks to emphasize the vital role of families, she expects her own to be frequent visitors to Indianapolis and the Governor’s mansion.



She calls her husband, Gov. Mike Braun, her “rock.” (Photo courtesy Whitney Downard/Indiana Capital Chronicle)

Our strength is always getting new items.

“Also, we are able to give the customer the perfect gift when they come in because we have good customer service. My staff is wonderful, and we really try to get the perfect gifts for people. Our customers come in and say, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to get this person.’ We say, ‘Tell us about the person.’ And then we end up finding the perfect gift and it’s very rewarding.”

BV: It sounds like old school, high-end customer service where you’re really helping customers make decisions. That’s so key since merchandise is only sold in store; it’s not online. What would you say is the secret to your longevity and success? And what are some things that you’ve had to overcome over the decades?

MB: “I would say first that credit goes to my staff because they’re just wonderful and they’re really what makes the difference in

our business. (She has two full-time employees – one of whom has been with the company for 46 of its 47 years. The other handles the imprinted promotion items, working with vendors throughout the country. A group of part-time workers – including high school students – completes the team.)

“And then you have to (embrace) change. A lot of people resist it, but it’s going to happen. Once a person learns that change is inevitable (it will be to your benefit). I think back when I went to market and put my first orders in; they were handwritten. I’m just so thankful for technology today!

“We’ve also had to adapt a lot over the years through unpredictable events with persistence and patience and passion. If you want to keep going, you have to find a way.”

(Braun rattled off a list of those unforeseen obstacles: a 1990 store fire that destroyed all the merchandise to national and global impacts such as 20% interest rates, the Great Recession, 9/11 uncertainty and the pandemic.)

BV: Encouraging more female business owners and entrepreneurs is a top focus for you. As First Lady, do you have a vision set yet on how are you going to pursue doing that?

MB: “We need more sharing. We need more encouraging of women to share their stories on how difficult it is to do different things. Not just that everything is perfect . . . so that we can learn from each other. I want to try to inspire women to also reach their dreams. Try what their dream is rather than waiting for an opportunity that may never happen. For me, opportunities never came when I was ready. Opportunities came and I had to balance it and go for it.

“I feel like just relating that to other people that (it’s a cumulative effect) and other women will encourage them. Also, encouraging moms to talk to their daughters now, in grade school and high school, to get them to find their strengths and weaknesses in what they want to do and about leadership. . . . As First Lady, there will be a lot of ways I will offer encouragement (to) connect people with all kinds of organizations and help them. (Whether that’s) for mentorship, job shadowing or just trying to get more women excited about business.”

BV: You and Governor Braun are a strong team. How do you see that dynamic playing out in this new chapter?

MB: “We are both so strong on faith, family and community. We would encourage whatever faith you are to connect with your faith family to help others. When you’re looking at our own family, we will be in Indianapolis many times. (All of us) were there (recently); that includes seven grandchildren, four children and their spouses and us. We had a wonderful weekend at the residence and enjoyed Indianapolis. As people see families around, we are hoping that families become very important. I think through politics some families have divided. And knowing that there are different thoughts – but (they are) your blood relatives and you love your family – just don’t talk politics when you’re together.

“So, I’m hoping that the family emphasis can be on connecting with each other again and being present when you are together. Giving back would be something (else) that we feel like would be very important for everyone to think about. . . .

“But as a team, when we go to events, we go early and are about the last ones there so people can tell us things that they want to have us think about – and we’re very good listeners. (Together) we can really do a lot.”

BV: You also helped establish the Heart of Jasper organization in 2020 and served as its first president. It’s part of the nationwide program, Main Street America, and focuses on bringing out that great small town experience. Please share why it’s so important to you to get involved in your community.

MB: “I got involved with Heart of Jasper because of downtown, being active there and wanting to improve the revitalization of our downtown. We really want young people to come back to Jasper and raise their family or attract new families to come. We’ve got a great education system and hospitals and community, but we really wanted to offer kind of that extra quality of life and that’s what started it. A lot of us together had the same idea and that’s where we formed Heart of Jasper . . . And Jasper is now nationally accredited (through Main Street America), which we’ve worked hard to do.

“I love that because we promote as a downtown, in the businesses, to shop local. We are wonderfully supported by our community. They support us through buying things and we support by giving back to the schools – whether it’s sports or music or band or whatever activities there are. Throughout the community, we get a lot of donation requests, but people understand that in order for us to give back too, they support us and it’s really a good mix.”



Of her brick-and-mortar store approach to retail, Braun explains the logic: “If you want to smell the candles, if you want to feel the softness of the throw covers or if you want to taste some of the products, you can in person. You can’t (have that experience) online.”

BV: What’s the best advice you’ve ever received?

MB: “From a business standpoint, I would say, ‘Be willing to change.’ From a personal standpoint, I would say, ‘To live each day to the fullest.’ That came from my mom after my dad died when I was 16 years old. That was probably one of the biggest impacts in my life because he was only 53 years old when he passed. You just have to learn to live every day to the fullest. That’s what keeps me passionate about so many things: Life is short; I want to make it meaningful for others.”

BV: What is the best decision you have ever made?

MB: “Probably marrying Mike because he was – and still is – my best friend and my supporter, my rock. He’s a wonderful dad and grandpa, and I knew marrying him would be an adventure and that life would never be boring. And he certainly has made that happen!”

BV: You touched on a lot of things that you’re passionate about, but is there anything else you wanted to mention?

MB: “Obviously, I’m passionate about giving back. I didn’t realize when I had a gift store how that was going to relate so much to the love of giving back . . . You just have that joy when you are helping people.

“The other thing I am passionate about though is health. I had migraines for years, and I had to find a way to battle those because they affected everything in my life. (As a result,) I am always looking for better health. I picked up running to help and I watch what I eat. I feel like health is really important for everybody and we could all improve on it.”

BV: We talked a little about what you may have envisioned for yourself growing up. How does that compare with where you are today?

MB: “Overall, I’m a pretty confident person and I know what I like. So (back then), I did want a wonderful husband, family and a beautiful home and place to live – and all of that has come true. But I do think that there were a lot of bonuses (along the way).

“I didn’t know I would be this involved in our community, and I really treasure all that time and relationships I’ve built with other people. And I never envisioned being a First Lady and what a bonus this will be. It’s an honor. I am just so excited to have this position to be able to influence and help other people. I’ll do my best.” ■