

Reston Limousine

She's in the Driver's Seat

By Linda Roberts

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The story of Reston Limousine Service and its owners makes the perfect plot for a happy-ever-after work of fiction. Kristina and William Bouweiri, its main characters, are living the real-life account of hard work and happiness that even sometimes they can't believe. Theirs is the classic tale of a man and woman who meet, fall in love and start a family together. Adding another dimension to their relationship, over a decade ago Kristina joined her husband in the limousine, bus and van business that he launched in 1990. Today, the couple has built the third largest bus company and 35th largest limousine business in the country. Kristina owns 51 percent of the company and holds the title of vice president and CEO. Her husband, William, the company's president, retains the other 49 percent. Located off Shaw Road in Sterling, Reston Limousine will soon relocate to new quarters in an office building under construction near the Dulles Town Center.

Now 47, William Bouweiri left his native Lebanon when his family made arrangements for him to live in Saudi Arabia at age 17 to learn land surveying. As he says, it was a very hard life and an even more difficult way to make a living. When the opportunity arose to move to America 23 years ago, William, who had earned the funds to send his family before him, gladly came. Taking a job as a driver with a limousine company in the metropolitan area, he received the break of a lifetime when a client presented him with a \$5,000 tip for a \$179.50 fare. That generous gift launched Reston Limousine, then located in Reston, with one car and William's brother, Stephen, as a driver. Their first client was Merrill Lynch's former chairman. Reston Limousine was on a roll.

At the time, Kristina, the Japanese-born daughter of Foreign Service employees who had lived overseas most of her life, was working in marketing in the Washington metropolitan area. She and William met during her sales call one afternoon to Reston Limousine. Not only did William buy the advertisements she was pitching, but Kristina also received an invitation to dinner. They married in 1991, the same year Reston Limousine won its first government contract for shuttle bus service. Leaving her marketing job following their wedding, Kristina went to work with William. Her role in the company has been increasing ever since. The original one-limousine business has expanded to a fleet of 93 vehicles that includes 45 shuttle buses, 35 vans and 13 limousines and sedans. Its revenues have risen from \$400,000 to \$6 million in 14 years. Kristina and William attribute their company's success to the bus contracts, which shuttle commuters on minibuses between their homes, government agencies, hospitals, airports and universities in the metropolitan area. Their 60 or so contracts keep their vehicles – and thousands of passengers – moving five to seven days per week. With routes in Virginia, Maryland and the District, the firm, with its 200 employees (175 are drivers), is the largest contactor in the area for shuttle service. “The buses are the work horses of the industry,” says Kristina. She adds that their limousine business is now generally a weekend and special event trade. The well-equipped, deluxe vehicles cater to social occasions such as weddings, proms, wine tours, corporate travel and diplomatic functions in Washington, DC. Kristina also credits the local business community with providing much support for the development of their business. She mentions another of their first clients, Washington Capitals majority owner and chairman Ted Leonsis, who eventually hired William's brother, Stephen, away from Reston Limousine to work for the team. “He (Ted Leonsis) asked us first

about hiring Stephen,” says marketing-minded Kristina, who relates that the issue didn’t present a problem for their business. “What’s good for Stephen is good for us,” she says, referencing that the Washington Capitals continue to support Reston Limousine with their business.

As their company expanded, Kristina became more involved in the day-to-day business operations, despite time away for the birth of the couple’s four children – three girls and a boy, now ranging in age from five to the eight-year-old twins. Kristina admits that maternity leave left her fretting to get back to the office and her ongoing plans for their company’s growth.

“She’s quick and very observant,” says William of his wife, who, over time, assumed the duties of marketing and proposal writing. In turn, her willing assistance allowed William the time to catch his breath and step back from the myriad of duties he’d faced for years in launching and operating the company. A major turning point for the business came four years ago with the couple’s decision to relocate their home from Herndon to Loudoun. With the pressing needs of their young family and the details of building a large custom home to oversee, the Bouweiris began making strategic decisions. Kristina’s passion was running the business. William’s excitement was rising as he supervised the lengthy construction of their new home southwest of Leesburg. He was already spending a portion of each day at the construction site, in addition to overseeing the schedules for the children.

For Kristina, there was a clear-cut solution. She remembers saying one day, “You deal with that, and I’ll deal with the office.” Kristina took over the driver’s seat at Reston Limousine. In response to her initial hesitation about taking charge of the company’s affairs, William reassured her by saying, “I’m only a phone call away.” He remembers that the 10 or so phone calls he initially received each day gradually reduced to one.

Growing their business has kept the Bouweiris working long hours and on the alert for years for the ring of a phone. For the first five years of their marriage, the couple transferred after-hours inquiries to their home to ensure each call was personally answered. Now, with the addition of general manager Frank Pistone and other supervisory staff, they have more time to themselves. Kristina has also watched as their insurance bill tripled from \$10,000 to \$30,000 a month in the time following 9/11. She focuses on safety tactics to reduce this expenditure while constantly promoting the business through networking and developing marketing strategies.

Kristina says that she sees more women entering the industry. “There are challenges, but, overall, being a female has helped me,” she says. “Women can provide excellent service and be more accountable, we take pride in what we do.” Legally classified as a woman-owned business, women account for 30 percent of Reston Limousine’s employees who serve as drivers for their vehicles.

Quite comfortable in their roles, Kristina and William find nothing unusual in the natural evolution of their public and private lives. Their arrangement works well for each and they believe best benefits the structure of their children’s lives as well. While William is not a daily presence at Reston Limousine’s headquarters, he remains very much the chief strategist behind the business from his home office. “I think people recognize that we’re running this business together,” says Kristina of their partnership and division of duties. “He handles all

the details with the phones and computer systems, while I deal with the customers and the marketing,” says Kristina. Business, civic and charity leaders have noticed something special about the couple and their company and the office walls are covered with recognitions. Always on the go, Kristina is involved with a number of organizations including the Loudoun, Fairfax, Reston and Herndon/Dulles chambers of commerce, the Committee for Dulles, the Loudoun and Washington convention and visitors associations, and eWomenNetwork, to name just a few. Kristina’s acts of kindness are spread randomly, and often go unnoticed. She especially directs her focus toward charities that benefit children such as the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Last year, the company was recognized in the Circle of Community Investors philanthropy list in the Washington Business Journal.

Ultimately, Kristina and William credit their personal happiness and business success to their own strong relationship. “We’ve learned not to talk business at home,” says William. “We have a great marriage and a relationship built on trust,” says Kristina, adding that she still does the grocery shopping.