



## Meredith Strang Burgess: Making the Most of Her Choices

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Janice Rogers

When you talk to Meredith Strang Burgess about how she came to be doing what she is today – CEO of Burgess Advertising and Marketing, Maine State Representative, cancer survivor and tireless advocate for the cancer community, she mentions vectors. Vectors? “In speaking to a group of young women professionals recently, I talked about how your life can take any number of different directions – or vectors – depending on the decisions you make at any given time about what you want to do, where you want to go. I don’t have any regrets about the vectors my life has taken,” she explains. And there have been many.

For example, when this former Natural Resource

Management major from UMaine found out she would not be allowed to travel to Antarctica with a group from the National Resources Management department because “she was a girl,” she instead moved to Boston with her new husband, landed a job as a McDonald’s hostess, and parlayed that into a successful marketing and advertising career with the McDonald’s Corporation.

In 1986, she started her own advertising agency with three other (male) partners, whom she eventually bought out in 1991. “When I wanted to start my own business, I didn’t have the confidence as a woman to do it on my own, so I found partners. We made it work, but when I bought them out, I had a classic female moment

*“It’s wonderful to see women do something that they never thought possible, by supporting each other along the way. It’s amazing what women can accomplish when we band together and pull each other up.”*



– knowing that I could do this on my own – and that felt good.” She supports the women in her workplace with family-friendly policies and a flexible, casual work environment (people can bring children and/or pets to work), which reflects her own down-to-earth demeanor and warm, open personality. Not surprisingly, in 2009, Burgess Advertising and Marketing was voted one of the top three best small businesses in the annual Best Places to Work in Maine program, and has just been named to the list for 2010.

Burgess built a successful organization based on understanding her customers thoroughly and providing “good, smart marketing” that was tailored to their individual needs. She developed a tightly knit, highly competent team who shared her passion for providing customers with top-notch service. She was soon to find out how much she would need that team.

In 1999, she received the call from her doctor that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer (“while I had a life insurance agent in my office, no less!” she cracks). While the news was horrible, fortunately, she and her management team had just created a new structure that delegated key decision making and responsibilities from Burgess to others. “We had some growing pains, and I was becoming a bottleneck, so our plan was to have me pull out of the everyday stuff and let others handle it.” She called her senior staff in and said, “Guess what? Our new plan goes into effect tomorrow.” Her team responded – and delivered. They did not lose a single client during the time Burgess was being treated.

Burgess chose to go public from the beginning about her cancer diagnosis. “I didn’t want to have any secrets or surprises – I wanted everyone to know what was going on and what our plan for the business was.” She also became passionate about advocacy and education. “I’ll drop anything and go anywhere for cancer,” she states. When she

was diagnosed, true to form, she quickly jumped into action to raise money with her first fundraiser, a head-shaving party at her office, and raised over \$1000!

In looking for an organization to support, she was intrigued by the Maine Cancer Foundation, which keeps all funds raised in Maine for patient education and research programs. She channeled her marketing savvy and business acumen into strengthening their organization, and helped found their annual Cure Breast Cancer for ME lunch in 2002. She also constantly mentors newly diagnosed cancer patients who are through treatment. “I’m sure you’ve heard this said before, but cancer truly is a gift,” she says. “It makes you stop and take stock of what you really want to do with your life. It’s a game changer.” She says it also reminded her of the importance of taking care of her body. When her best friend, Julie Jordan Marchese, also a cancer survivor, launched the first ever triathlon for women in Maine, Tri for a Cure, to benefit the Maine Cancer Foundation, Burgess’s volunteered to participate – and come in last. “I’ve heard women say they’d like to do a triathlon, but they’re afraid they’ll come in last. I make sure they don’t have to worry about that!” Over 1000 women participated in the Tri for a Cure in 2010, many first time triathletes, and raised over \$1,000,000 for the Maine Cancer Foundation.

She finds the energy, enthusiasm and spirit that women bring to the events like the Tri an inspiration. “It’s wonderful to see women do something that they never thought possible, by supporting each other along the way. It’s amazing what women can accomplish when we band together and pull each other up.”

How are you making the most of your choices?  
Tell us.

