

WOMEN *in* BUSINESS



Industry Leader

Mary Lilja

President, Lilja Inc.

EVERYONE VALUES A GOOD STORYTELLER, and Mary Lilja is one of the finest.

For more than 30 years, Lilja has shaped and shared the stories of a variety of organizations, helping them to build business and find success. As president of public relations and communications firm Lilja Inc., she's worked with major companies such as Barnes & Noble Inc., Honeywell International Inc., GameStop and Dayton Hudson Corp. (now Target Corp.).

Having grown up in a family-owned business, Lilja stands as an advocate of family-owned firms and is happy to take on clients such as Pohlad Cos. and Murphy Warehouse Co. to tell the story of how these type of family businesses benefit the community. Three years ago, she expanded her services to include Lilja LifeStories, a program that helps people learn from their own family histories, because she believes that such stories are what make up the fabric of our society and drive meaningful change.

Helping nonprofit organizations is another strong passion for Lilja. She provides pro bono support to Planned Parenthood, the Minnesota Dance Theater, a children's hospice program and a Hmong arts organization.

—Elizabeth Millard,
contributing writer

What was your first job?

I was as a camp counselor at age 15. It went well except for during a thunderstorm on a canoe trip I led on a river. Thankfully, no one tipped, the wind blew us to the

shore and I learned my lesson: Get off the water early.

If you had to name a woman leader who's inspired you most, who would it be, and why?

Kay Sexton, a vice president at B. Dalton Bookseller at a time when very few women were senior business leaders. Kay was well respected in the company and in the book industry, and she always spoke her mind. Even today, Kay remembers conversations the two of us had years ago, word for word. She is amazing!

What's the best way to network?

Serving on boards. The work is rewarding, the people are interesting and you get to know each other in more in-depth ways.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Slowing down, making space and time for contemplation. I have a practice that involves morning meditation, yoga and spending as much time in nature as I can. My husband and I share this interest; we are in two groups that help us stay grounded in this practice.

What's been your life's biggest challenge?

Balancing working with parenting. There were many nights I came home and was physically present, but my mind was back at the office, working on a problem. Fortunately, the kids survived and thrived — all three are happy, successful and working in their chosen fields.

What's an obsolete item you can't get rid of?

A red plaid wool poncho my mom gave me for my 16th birthday. Every 10 years or so it comes back into style, and it's perfect for cold mornings in the fall.

What's the worst business advice you've gotten in your career?

Someone told me I should skip a funeral for an already-planned business trip. I took their advice and will never do that again.

What advice do you give women in their professional development?

Learn how to balance work, family and self. If you overdo, you won't be good with any of them.