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MARY LEE GANNON

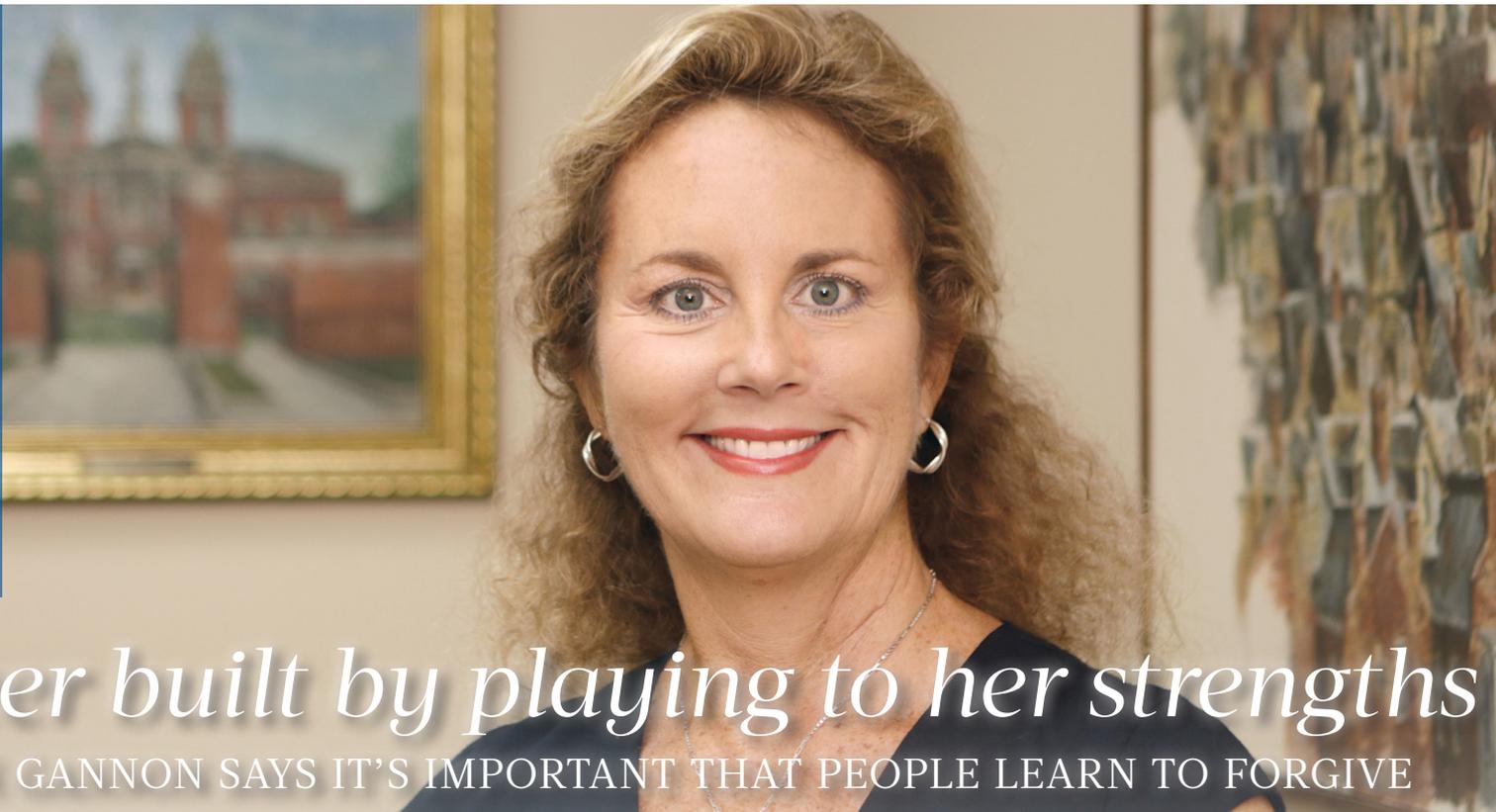
Title: President, St. Margaret Foundation

Past experience: CEO of Forbes Health Foundation; executive director of Ohio Valley General Hospital Foundation; and executive director of Three Rivers Advertising Specialty Association

Age: 58

Residence: O'Hara Township

Hobbies: Executive coaching, travel, knitting, cooking



A career built by playing to her strengths

MARY LEE GANNON SAYS IT'S IMPORTANT THAT PEOPLE LEARN TO FORGIVE

Mary Lee Gannon is not only president of the St. Margaret Foundation, but also a career and life skills coach and an author. Gannon's life work became clear when her life changed abruptly and dramatically following a divorce. As a single mother of four children, she found herself without an income and, later, homeless and on assistance. Her experiences led her to share what she's learned with people in similar situations, as well as those who want to reinvent themselves.

You've lived a reinvention.

I was married with four children living in a beautiful home in Fox Chapel. On the outside, it looked like I had the country club life. Behind closed doors, it was an unpalatable situation. I made a conscious decision that I needed to be a good role model for my children and in order to be able to do that, I needed to draw a boundary out of my marriage. I had no idea the avalanche that would befall me after that.

What happened?

I thought there would be a justice system in place that would make my husband provide for these kids. What I didn't anticipate is that six months after I filed for divorce, my husband placed his businesses in bankruptcy on loans I had co-signed for his business. So when he defaulted on those, all of the marital property went into the bankruptcy: the homes, the automobiles, everything.

What did you do?

I looked at my life and said I have to own this. I decided to go off on my own career path. I looked at my strengths. I think if we play to our strengths, we can be awesome. If we play to our weaknesses, we'll only get to be mediocre. My philosophy has always been play to my strength and surround myself

with people who have my weaknesses as their strengths.

How did you do that?

I've always been a connector. I met with people and met with people and met with people. I said, "here's my skill set, here's what I can do. I need to find purposeful work." There are angels along the way if you open yourself to find them, and be vulnerable enough to say, "I need help."

You became the executive director of a trade association.

I had no experience whatsoever. I figured it out. I got in there; I tripled the trade show attendance in the first year for the simple reason that if I made them more money, then they could pay me more money. At this point, I made the decision to thrive. When I made the decision to thrive, I became more strategic about the positions I would seek. I was very aware of my strengths and could demonstrate measurable accomplishments in those strengths.

How did you get into hospital foundation fundraising?

One of my contacts knew of a job at Ohio Valley Hospital as executive director of their foundation, which again I had no formal paid experience doing. She recommended me for the role. I went into the interview and said, "look, I've taken on a lot of roles where I haven't had a lot of paid experience, but I have had volunteer experience in fundraising. I grew up in a home where my mother did a lot of that."

After a lot of success at Ohio Valley and Forbes, you became CEO of St. Margaret Foundation.

I've been very fortunate to work very hard to earn the trust of my board who has been very supportive. When I got here, we had to make a lot of changes. They trusted me and aligned with me, and we have turned this foundation into a

remarkable asset to this community.

How has what you have gone through helped you mentor and coach others?

That's why I coach. The biggest lesson for me is that we must learn to forgive. Because if we carry around resentment, it turns to anger and all of that is just a mask for sad. If we can't sit with sadness and reconcile sadness, it shows up in a lot of different ways. I wrote a book, "Starting Over." It talks about learning to forgive and letting go, and not having to win all the time, and what winning really is. So that started the healing process for me. When I wrote that book, people started calling me.

What is your secret to success?

One of the reasons I think I've met with success is that I've always strived to create experiences – for donors, boards, employees, events – where people feel they belong and can be a part of something that matters. I learned early of the body of research that shows that people who are happy feel they are worthy and belong. So I've spent my career trying to build that wherever I am. Fun with purpose.

What else do you do on your off times?

I love to travel. My husband is an international lawyer, so sometimes I'm able to accompany him on trips. We both love to travel. That's our hobby together. I knit.

When do you find the time to knit?

I taught myself to knit because I had my first grandchild. He's one year old. I love to cook. My new hobby is I'm learning creative lettering. Not because I want to do calligraphy but because I can't even read my own handwriting.

– Paul J. Gough