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Laguna!

LIFE & PEOPLE

Laguna powerhouse Laura Tarbox on success & community

By **ELIZABETH NUTT**

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When speaking with Laura Tarbox, the words that come up most frequently are 'family' and 'friends,' her focus during our interview, despite the fact that we're seated at the Newport Beach headquarters of the Tarbox Group—the wealth management firm Laura founded 30 years ago. There is an unmistakable down-to-earth quality and warmth about Laura that make her true values come across as clearly as the view of the Pacific Ocean directly behind her. She is a people-person, which is undoubtedly a quality that has helped her along the path to becoming the woman she is today: a hugely successful financial advisor and one of the leading benefactors in the Laguna Beach community.



The Tarbox Group's beginnings

Laura, raised in Santa Monica, attended UCLA and—despite her parents' protests—majored in English. After she graduated in 1980, she found herself faced with the classic dilemma: *what do I do with my English degree?*

Fortunately, Laura's mother's boyfriend, a stockbroker, had an entry-level opportunity for her at his Tustin office. And with that, Laura did what she thought she'd never do: leave West L.A. and head south for Orange County. She moved to the Victoria Beach area of Laguna Beach, and commuted back and forth along Laguna Canyon Road each day.

While Laura fell in love with Laguna Beach, she simultaneously became captivated by the financial world. Though she initially spent her first days and weeks post-college cold calling, she was hooked by the industry. Only five years after graduating from college, Laura made the decision to start her own company in 1985.

"I was working 60-80 hours a week during that time," says Laura, who held several other jobs—delivering the *Wall Street Journal*, for example—while she worked tirelessly to build the foundation for the Tarbox Group.

Her company was one of the early firms to offer fee-based wealth management services. Going against the grain in that sense for Laura meant that those early years required intense effort and determination. But when asked why she didn't want to build a commission-based business, Laura will simply tell you that she thought she was "doing the right thing."



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At work

Today, not only does Laura still have clients from those early days, but she'll also tell you that the majority of her clients—roughly 100 families—have become close friends of hers.

As for the Tarbox Group? "It's like a big family," she says.

Which is important, considering the fact that there were obvious challenges present for Laura as a woman entering the financial world, and especially one with an entrepreneurial mindset. She'll admit that it remains a struggle for her to this day—though she's had countless victories over the years. One shining moment for Laura? The day she realized that if *she* wanted to paint her office walls and have her letterhead be purple, then they'd be purple! It's *her* company, after all, and she's learned to embrace who she is as its leader.

"The number of women in financial services hasn't really changed much over the years," she says, "but I've always used that to my advantage." Even still, Laura says that in meetings held at her office, salespeople will sometimes fail to make eye contact with or speak directly to her, even though the company is *her* namesake. Moments like those, however, don't hold Laura back. She's strengthened by her experiences, which she's shared with countless of those young women and students whom she's mentored and taught over the years.

"Numbers and financial skills... anyone can learn those. *People* skills are so important in this business, because you become so integrated into people's lives... and I think in many ways, women do better there," says Laura.

Laura understands that there are many emotions and issues around money—one of the biggest challenges for her in her day-to-day work—and she's found that the more personal you can get and the more you can connect with clients, the more it becomes a team effort, where trust and strong relationships are built naturally.

Serving the Laguna Beach community

Relationships, collaboration and connecting with others are values that have enabled Laura to find success and fulfillment in other areas of her life, too—especially when it comes to community service. She was raised by parents who instilled in her the importance of giving back to your community; her father was a member of the Big Brother organization, and her mother held leadership roles within the Girl Scouts organization. For Laura, time spent giving back is just as important as time spent within the four purple walls of her corner office.

Before her daughter was born and during her first few years as a Laguna Beach resident, Laura joined the SchoolPower Endowment Fund as a Board Member. Soon after, she started to devote her time to other Laguna non-profits, such as the Laguna Canyon Foundation and the Community Clinic.

It wasn't until she joined the Laguna Beach Community Foundation in the early 2008, however, that Laura discovered an organization through which her leadership could have the greatest impact in terms of connecting with and supporting countless, wide-ranging local non-profits. Today, she's the Founding Chair, and is undoubtedly responsible for much of the organization's tremendous growth and success since it was founded in 2004.

"For me, joining the Laguna Beach Community Foundation was the best decision...a natural fit for what I do business-wise, and I love Laguna," says Laura, who works most frequently on the investment side of the organization. She loves working with a foundation that can reach all of the other sub-organizations and non-profits in Laguna Beach, and she is a big believer in the organization's mission: strengthening the Laguna Beach community by encouraging, supporting, and providing expertise and resources for its non-profits.

It's a lofty mission, considering the fact that Laguna Beach's zip code boasts one of the highest numbers of non-profit organizations in California. The sheer number of non-profits can be a challenge, according to Laura, but the LBCF has helped provide so many organizations with tools that they might not otherwise have access to—such as board infrastructure and tax counsel.

"We see ourselves as unique and special, which we are," says Laura, when asked why she thinks Laguna Beach has such a wonderfully philanthropic spirit. She also adds that she's found many great friends through her work with non-profits; the spirit of giving is one that helps form unique bonds among Laguna Beach residents.

Laura's vibrant life



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At home

Although it's hard to believe that Laura has time for anything but work and the LBCF, those things are just a part of what makes her who she is. Today, Laura resides in a beautiful 'coastal craftsman' on Manzanita Drive, and she's an avid reader and adventurer. Some of her favorite activities are partaking in her *two* local book groups, and practicing yoga at YogaWorks.

She's also part of a group of women who embark on annual hiking adventures to various mountain communities in the US; last year, they hiked in Jackson Hole. Oh, and she also somehow finds enough hours in the day to run on a regular basis, too, and to grab a bite at Zinc Café, her favorite Laguna hangout.



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Laura is also a devoted mother to daughter, Jane, who is a sophomore at the University of Maryland. When asked if her daughter will follow in her footsteps, Laura says, “No! My parents constantly scolded me about getting a degree in English, saying it was impractical. My daughter *loves* music, and I’ll encourage her to pursue a career in the arts, even if she has doubts about it... I’m happy to just be supportive of her no matter what path she chooses,” says Laura.

Oh, and her best advice to women, self-starters, and people in general? “Be yourself, and play to *your* strengths,” she says, with the confident smile of a woman whose strength knows no limits.