

Former banking exec is now blazing trails

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Ann Hayes Browning joined a Bank of America predecessor in 1983 and over 23 years rose to success in the high-stakes arena of private equity investing.

In 2006, she left to join the nonprofit world. The High Point native is project director for the Carolina Thread Trail, an emerging network of trails and greenways that supporters envision spanning 15 Charlotte-area counties. She works for the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the project's lead agency, working in partnership with The Trust for Public Land.

Browning, now 52, is married with two teenage stepchildren. She spoke with MoneyWise about the reason for the switch, how she found her new spot, transferrable skills, new moves she had to learn and why she's still working long hours. Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.



6/01/09 After 23 years as a Bank of America exec, Ann Browning left to pursue a non-profit career. She's leading the Carolina Thread Trail project, which spans 15 counties. This is for the latest incarnation of the moneywise feature - on people who have changed careers. ROBERT LAHSEY-rlahser@charlotteobserver.com

Q. Why did you leave an executive post with the bank for a nonprofit?

I had a great career at the bank, but I was ready for a change. I traveled a lot, had long hours. It kept me from being as engaged in the community as I wanted to be. I had an interest in looking into the nonprofit world, particularly through reaching back to what was important to me as a kid. Many of my most cherished childhood memories were set in woods and creeks and fields. I thought how great it would be to get a job where I could focus on preserving these spaces for kids in the future.

Q. What led you to the trail project?

I was serving on an advisory board for the trust when I was thinking about making the change. I had the exposure to know it was something I was really interested in. I also was involved with the Women's Impact Fund, a grant-making entity. I served on the grants committee for the environment. It exposed me to some of the entities doing great work for the environment in the region. That was a way to establish contacts and look for areas that might be a good match for me.

Q. How were you able to afford a considerable pay cut?

I socked some money away, and I was able to think about looking at opportunities that might bring other rewards to the table. There are some great benefits that come from working in the corporate environment. There are some intangible benefits that come from working for a nonprofit in an area you're passionate about.

Q. What was the hardest thing to learn at first?

After so many years in one setting, I was so comfortable in the language, the decision-making processes, just how things worked. When I was introduced to such a new and different environment, I felt a little off-balance at first. It took a bit of time to get my bearings.

Q. How do the jobs differ?

It's equally exciting and engaging. There's a lot of opportunity for creativity that wasn't as much a part of my old job. I do a lot more public speaking, a lot less financial analysis. There's so much support infrastructure at the bank, but in a nonprofit setting, everybody has got to pitch in and do everything.

Q. What about the similarities?

Some things are very similar, like the type of strategic thinking and organization skills needed, winning the hearts and minds for whatever it is you're promoting, whether it's investment in a private company or investment in a network of trails. I carried over some skills, but it's also been a great way to stretch me in new directions.

Q. What's an example of that stretch?

There's a strong marketing element in promoting a vision of the type I'm working on, getting a broad cross-section of people bought in – community leaders, elected officials, outdoor enthusiasts. Those are constituencies I really didn't deal with in my prior job.

Q. You're a few years into this, but it's still a startup, with night and weekend meetings. Do you regret not taking an easier route?

It's not the downshift that some people might expect. I met so many great people that I just wouldn't have been exposed to otherwise. Meeting all of these leaders who make things happen in their communities has been really rewarding.

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