

The Kite Flyer – Helping a Spouse Soar
Speech by Penny Castagnozzi, Presented at UGA's Spouses' Workshop
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I'm honored to be speaking to you this morning - not just honored to be asked to speak, but honored that YOU are the particular group of people that I will be addressing.

The fact that you're here this morning speaks volumes for the type of spouses you are already. Many of you had to take time away from your own careers and duties to attend this convention with your partner. Many of you had to set up creative babysitting schedules for your younger children – five days is a long time to ask someone to watch your precious youngsters! Maybe you have figured out a couple of my old techniques, “Divide and Conquer!” and “Share the Wealth!” I know the system well! Some of you had to set up cameras in the house to ward off extravagant holiday parties hosted by your generous teen-aged children!

Many of you probably have had to overextend yourselves in the last few days, furiously shopping, wrapping, and cooking for the upcoming holidays, all to free up time for this week.

But you did something beyond coming to the reunion with your spouse. You got up early this morning, and made a commitment to come and learn how to be an even better spouse. You each deserve a walk on stage for going that one extra step toward being a better partner to someone you must care very much about. UGA recognizes that, and so do I, as a wife that has attended every one of these spouses' seminars. These workshops are ideal situations for becoming better people, better spouses, better work partners. It can only help you and your spouse in this business, and on your journey together through life.

I was asked to speak because of my many years of experience of being the wife of an agent and team leader. In the years since my husband, Rich, first started with this company, I've seen changes in company policies, changes in health care products, changes in roles, and, unfortunately, changes in hair color!

Rich has been with UGA for 18 years, and has attended 18 reunions- the only year I wasn't by his side, sharing this wonderful experience, was the one year my dad was very ill with cancer. I have gotten so much out of each of these reunions - camaraderie with other agents and their spouses, top notch entertainment, delicious food and abundant drinks. What's not to love there? It was more than fun, though. I also kept my ears open and absorbed as much information about the company as possible, allowing me to share another dimension of my husband's life.

I am not going to stand here and tell you that I am the reason that Rich is successful in this company. He has an inner passion to be the best at whatever he does. My role has been to help guide and support him on his quest to continually better himself.

I love analogies, so I am going to compare my role as a spouse to that of a kite flyer. There are many keys to being a good kite flyer, and I'd love to share them with you.

Lesson 1: First, you have to find a good kite – one with real beauty and strength. I met my husband when he was 15, and I was 16. Picture this. It was December of 1974 (yes 34 years ago) and I was at a party with my friends in a cellar that was lit only by blacklights. Rich walked in wearing his brother's long leather coat, under which he wore a patterned polyester shirt and carefully coordinated polyester pants – always a great dresser! He came over to talk to me and I was taken by his cute face with the long eyelashes and dimpled smile. Rich was funny and talkative, and everyone seemed to know and like him. As he talked warmly about his family and was friendly with everyone at the party, I sensed he was beautiful on the inside, as well as on the outside. The longer I dated him, the more I saw this to be true.

As for being strong, he was the rugged captain of the hockey team, and the skilled captain of the baseball team, but more importantly, I saw that he was a fighter. Like most people in our town, his family was of modest means, and Rich knew he was going to find a career that would afford him some of the nicer things he wanted in life. He was determined to have a great car, a comfortable home for his family, vacations at beautiful getaways, and clothes and jewelry that he had prized as a child, and he was willing to work as hard as he needed to get there. That's the kind of strength I'm talking about.

Lesson 2: Find an open space to fly your kite – free from trees and buildings that could hinder its flight.

Rich's first career was that of a restaurant manager. He eventually owned his own pizza restaurant, called Caz's. I left my career and went to work with Rich for a few years, 17 hours a day, until I started having babies...one after another. We had 3 girls between 1985 and 1988, and Rich continued to work crazy hours so I could stay home and grow children! I'd bring the kids to work to see him as often as possible, but the kids really missed their dad, and he felt like he was really missing out on their lives. One day, as we were driving by the restaurant, one of the girls pointed to the restaurant building and said, "Look! That's where Dad lives!" "No, honey, Dad actually still lives with us! He just works a lot!" I replied. Another day, one of the girls said, "Mom, 'member Dad..." That was all it took to make Rich leave the all-consuming restaurant business and get his life back.

Rich knew someone who had done really well in the mortgage business, so he signed up with him and started selling mortgages – right before the mortgage slump of the '80's! My beautiful kite crashed right into a building! Ouch! Looking back, though, it was the best thing that ever could have happened. I picked up my kite, dusted it off, and reinforced it so it was stronger than ever. Then we both went searching for the open skies

that would allow us to fly and reach great heights. In 1990, Rich found the career he was meant for.

Lesson 3: Run a few steps with your kite to get it going.

It was not easy to run with my kite on this one. The new career my husband chose was selling health insurance with a company that offered no salary, no free health insurance, no company car, no guaranteed commissions... “That sounds like a great job, honey!” But Rich had a very close high school friend who had done extremely well with this company, and he had really trusted the division leader when he interviewed with him, so he asked me to give him 6 months to prove that he could make this work.

I held onto the kite string and took some baby steps - the kite lingering just above my head.

Rich knew that he simply could not fail at this job. It just wasn't an option to him. We were living from paycheck to paycheck, with three kids in diapers, and me busy changing them! He threw himself into this business, and started to make some sales! My husband didn't have a great closing ratio, but he did have a great work ethic. He would have 12 appointments scheduled, and would close only 2 or 3, but money was starting to come in.

Maybe this kite would make it.

Lesson 4: Hold on to the kite string and start running a little faster, with larger steps.

From our basement office, I started making the phone calls to set sales appointments for Rich. I set aside one day to make these calls, freeing him up to spend more time meeting with his prospects. I had no sense of where any of the towns were as I booked him in. I just focused on scheduling Rich's appointments in 2 hour intervals, having him travel anywhere across the state of Massachusetts if potential customers would see him. Rich would often travel back and forth across the state several times each day - North Shore, South Shore, North Shore, Western Mass, Cape Cod, Boston, all in a day. He would grimace when he'd check out the week's filled schedule book that I'd proudly show him on Monday nights, but he didn't complain. We both knew he had to make every sale possible to pay off the credit card debt, the mortgage payments, and the diaper bills. Then came the day I booked him an appointment that required a ferry trip, or a very short plane ride, I explained. Rich bought me a map that evening.

Lesson 5: Run faster with the kite, giving it a little more string as it takes off.

I started to think of the appointment setting as a game - like a slot machine. Pull that lever enough times and you're going to hit a payout, sometimes a jackpot. I was friendly with the customers, and often joked with them, assuring that I'd make sure my husband would be on time for their meeting. Joking around and treating the customers as more than a prospect made it a pleasant experience for the people I called, and made it an endurable job for me.

Our system was working and Rich started getting good commissions and hitting milestones in his new sales career. Life settled down to a comfortable speed, Rich getting more referrals, working more reasonable hours and being able to spend more time with our little girls. He charted out time to attend all their dance recitals and plays at school, helped take them to doctors' visits, and entertained them at their crazy birthday parties. Seeing his success, I was able to spend less time helping him with his business, and more time developing my own business as a reading therapist.

Lesson 6: As it rises, give the kite a little more string to let it really soar.

After a few years as a very successful sales agent, Rich took on the role of District Leader. My tendency was to pull in the kite string and say, "No, no change – we're comfortable!" but Rich told me to let him try it for a little while, and promised that he could always return to his agent status if it didn't work out. He became a District Leader, and, for a while, there were more expenses, more lengthy phone calls in the evenings, and a little more stress to be successful in this new position. With Rich's developed sales skills and wonderful personal skills, though, he flourished at this level, as well. He started hiring new people, training them and supporting them in growing their own sales careers. A few times, theirs was the number one district in the country. I hosted parties for the agents and their spouses, and enjoyed the close friendships we developed with everyone on our team.

Three years ago, my kite demanded even more string. Rich was offered the opportunity to leave his comfortable position in the division he had started with to break out as a Division Leader himself. He had to leave behind some of his most treasured teammates and friends, and had to rebuild a team. Would he be able to make it in this new position? Knowing Rich, it wasn't too hard to have faith in his abilities. He had a few key agents who could step up as District Leaders, and he was able to bring with him a very small group of sales agents who he had worked with for years. It's been a wild three years, with lots of dips and turns. Slowly, but surely, though, the team has grown in size and ability. They are truly soaring now, alongside Rich, currently the top division in the country. What we are both most proud of, though, is that this team is not only being recognized for their tremendous sales numbers, but that they are also being recognized for having the highest ethics. This virtue is even more important in an industry that is often considered suspect. Rich and his teammates can hold their heads up high.

Lesson 7: The smallest hand movements can affect the flight of your kite dramatically.

Through each leg of his career, I have been very proud of my husband, and have always been right there to tell him so. I think it's extremely important to praise people, not only for their accomplishments, but also for their efforts. I tell Rich all the time that I would be madly in love with him even if he was the poorest man in the world, and that he doesn't have to have anything materially to make me proud of him. I am just so impressed that each day he goes out and tries to be kind and caring, and tries to be the best at the job he has before him. He is a true champion for getting up early each day and putting 100 percent of his effort into trying to build a successful career for not only himself, but for each of the people on his team.

Lesson 8: Expect wind gusts. Your kite will rise, and fall, and rise again.

It would be so easy to be supportive if everything always went smoothly, if nothing ever blocked your way to what you wanted, but that is not the way life is. With any company, with any job, with any life, there will be hurdles. Having been here as long as we have, Rich and I have seen the company change in many ways. Management has experienced great changes. The stock has plummeted to just a few points above zero before rebounding to great heights again. Insurance plans have been changed, and new ones have been offered. Many agents will go through their times of uncertainty. As much as we might dislike change, it is inevitable.

Lesson 9: Whatever you do, don't drop the string!

Many people have come upon hard times and run. When times have gotten tough in my husband's career, I've continued to support Rich, offering bits of insight, showing that I have faith in him and in his career coming through it all in better form than ever. It's easy to support and compliment someone when they're winning, but the truly life-changing support is when things are not going well. My husband doesn't really need my support when he's made great sales, or hired great sales agents, or won awards for leadership. He needs me when deals kick, plans change, or people are disappointed in the market. I hold onto that kite string, and we ride it out together. We find out what the hurdles are, and jump over them, or at least walk around them! We look for better ways to sell, and we think of sincere ways to boost moral and make people feel better about themselves and their futures.

These dips and changes aren't fun. I have to admit that I do hate change. I always have...but, like my husband, I never give up. At the age of 30 I was diagnosed with having a degenerative eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa. It progressively takes away a person's night vision and peripheral vision. I could easily have given up upon hearing that news. The doctor who diagnosed me put it very bluntly, "Your eyes are going to keep getting worse, and there is no cure." Period. Was I sad to hear this life-changing news? Yes. Was I torn with my decision to stop driving seven years later? Absolutely – remember I hate change! And I have hated not being able to play the sports I would have played, or take my children to places by myself, or walk independently in crowded rooms. My self-esteem has taken a blow, my independence has taken a blow, but, like Rich, I am a fighter, and I will not let any of these things stop me from being the best person I can be. My way of dealing with upsets is to see them as temporary hurdles, not walls. I may not be able to drive a car – right now – but I can drive my life and do creative things to touch people in faraway places. I cannot see in the dark, but I see the light that glows from the caring people around me. What I do see, I see well, and I have been afforded, by Rich and UGA, the time to do what I enjoy most, writing books, creating educational materials, and enjoying my family. Through all of my difficulties and successes, all my ups and downs, Rich has been beside me, with a strong arm to lean on, and a joke to make light of every little dilemma.

As I hold his kite string, he holds mine.

Lesson 10: Last but not least, enjoy **your kite's flight.**

This company has so much to offer us all. Our family has been able to not only dig its way out of debt, but we've put 3 girls through college. We have earned our way onto every reward trip offered by the company, stayed at castles in England, watched a bullfight in Madrid, caught 7 marlin in Cabo San Lucas, entertained friends in Maui, and escaped death in a parasailing fiasco in Cancun – but that's another whole story!

We've dined like kings and queens, and spent time with some of the most interesting, entertaining, passionate people in the country – our colleagues in this company. The sky is bright and limitless. There is so much for you and your spouses to enjoy.

You've got your kite. Now grab onto that kite string and run! I hope to watch you soar to great heights with happiness!