

Mary Hargrave | River Oak Center for Children



**Mary Hargrave,
president and chief
executive officer,
River Oak Center
for Children**

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU
GIVE A YOUNGER WOMAN?**

Work very hard and keep learning. Don't marry a jerk.

**WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF
THE BUSINESS CLIMATE
IN SACRAMENTO?**

When our daughter, who lives in Berkeley, told me a few years ago that "Sacramento is now cool," I was a little surprised, but I can see it in the youth and excitement that is everywhere downtown on weekend nights. The business climate is obviously in a correction phase right now, and we are more vulnerable because of the government funding crisis, but the future will be positive and back on track.

**WHO HAS BEEN THE
GREATEST INFLUENCE ON
YOUR CAREER AND WHY?**

First, my family and especially my father who taught me about the world of work. Their interest and commitment to charitable giving and helping others steered me toward this path. Then my husband, George, who has always expected and supported my best efforts. Also, Renee Snider, who early on really believed in our mission in Sacramento and has been unbelievably supportive to me and to the children at River Oak.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?

On-call retail clerk at Hales in Arden Fair. My first real job after graduating from Sacramento State was as a caseworker in King County, Wash. (the Seattle area), working with families with children who were on welfare.

**IF YOU WEREN'T IN YOUR
CURRENT PROFESSION,
WHAT WOULD YOU
CHOOSE TO BE DOING?**

Art history professor

As a young woman opting for a career when many of her peers stayed home with their children, Mary Hargrave was warned against keeping a stapler on her desk.

Such trappings could cause people to associate her with clerical work, and she was striving for much more.

Hargrave also remembers when, to get a charge card, she had to have her husband write the credit card company a letter giving his wife permission.

A psychologist who has run River Oak Center for Children for 24 years, Hargrave said she hasn't experienced a lot of gender-based barriers during her career. Those she did encounter, she ignored.

STORY BY
KELLY JOHNSON

PHOTO BY
DENNIS McCOY

Air Force then, and he liked the job. "I thought that would be a good thing to do," she recalled.

The Air Force's chief of psychology didn't. Hargrave didn't care. "I wanted to do it, and I'm going to do it anyway," she remembered thinking.

Colleagues say they respect Hargrave for her quiet determination and strength.

"When she speaks, we listen," said Sonbol Aliabadi, executive director of the Sierra College Foundation.

As the oldest member of her American Leadership Forum class, Hargrave impressed the group with her perseverance on the 8,580-foot-high trek up the Sierra Butte.

The Fair Oaks resident is equally determined when it comes to protecting, treating and healing the emotionally and behaviorally challenged children served by River Oak Center for Children.

After stints in Texas and Oregon, Hargrave in 1982 moved back to Sacramento, where she had graduated from high school and college, to become program director for River Oak. She became president and chief executive officer three years later.

"She's dedicated her life to helping other people. It's a real admirable thing," said Kathy McKim, vice president of external affairs for AT&T.

Hargrave oversees a staff of about 200 and a \$15 million budget — which has shrunk by a few million due to funding cuts. On any given day, River Oak works with 900 kids plus their parents and siblings.

"She has persevered all sorts of funding cycles through public, state

and federal funding and really maintained the level of quality for children's services in her focus on providing what's best for the entire family," said Rose Lester, who has run three capital campaigns for River Oak. "I admire her for that."

Back in 1990, Hargrave had the vision to launch a capital campaign to raise money for the nonprofit's building so any funding River Oak received could go to services instead of operations, Lester said. "Early on she understood the need of private-sector funds."

Others describe Hargrave as wise, introspective and humble. "She doesn't have to be the center of attention," said Jan Stohr, who founded and ran the Nonprofit Resource Center until her retirement three years ago.

Hargrave also brings a sense of humor to her work, and "really understands collaboration," Stohr said.

Hargrave said she never had a plan for her career. She just knew she didn't want to stay home.

She advises other women to find something about which they're passionate.

"I'm still a child of the '60s where we were going to make the world a better place," she said.

Her husband, George, has had the biggest influence on her career. He's eight years older so he often encountered leadership opportunities first, such as working for a board of directors. She learned by watching and listening to him and other men.

Her husband, she said, never allowed her to doubt her abilities or opportunities because of her gender. And as it turned out, they took turns moving for the other's career, depending on which of them had the better job offer. Her husband followed her to Sacramento for the River Oak job.

The Air Force gave Hargrave her first taste of being a supervisor. "It really made me feel like I could be in charge of things," she said.

It has been "easier to be a female leader in" human services, where three-fourths of the work force are women, she said.

For the past 27 years, Hargrave said she hasn't had to think about her gender as an issue in her professional life.

"There's still that glass ceiling," she said, but it probably depends on the profession.

Hargrave thinks Sacramento's business climate for women is pretty open, and she's impressed by this region's female leaders. For some of them, she said, "I can't imagine anything standing in their way."