

No Taming Tillie

CEO attributes success to family and passion for the greater good

By Jennifer Hogan Redmond

Forget every preconceived notion you've ever had about female CEOs and meet Tillie Hidalgo Lima. With her gentle voice and the occasional-dare I even say it-giggle, she transcends the stereotype of the powerful corporate liberator. You know, the women we imagine smashing through the glass ceiling while commanding fearful respect in the boardroom. In fact, most of us moms would feel quite comfortable baking cookies in Tillie's kitchen and chatting with her over a cup of hot coffee.

Behind her soft-spoken demeanor, however, is a firm decisiveness and a passion that is infectious. "We can do it" is Tillie Hidalgo Lima's motto. She believes these words, lives them, and has every right to claim them as absolute, at home and in the office.

As president and CEO of Best Upon Request, a Cincinnati-based national concierge firm, Tillie has done what colleagues deem "nothing short of miraculous" in turning the struggling company around full speed in only five years. But there is much more to this success story. Beyond the accolades and the impressive business statistics is a closely-knit family accustomed to living-and working-together.



Jessica Lima is Tillie's oldest daughter and communications manager for Best Upon Request. Natalie, Jessica's younger sister, joins the team as one of Tillie's executive assistants when she is home from college. Seventeen-year-old Sofia helps out at the office after school three days a week and during the summer and holiday breaks. Dave Lima, the girls' father and Tillie's husband of 26 years, founded the firm and now runs his own company.

Challenge and Change

This isn't quite what Tillie envisioned when she graduated from the University of Cincinnati's College of Pharmacy in 1983. When her children were two, five and eight-years-old, Dave started the business while Tillie financially supported the family working full-time managing an independent pharmacy.

He soon asked her to join him for operational support because he wanted someone who was good with numbers and people. "Oh, no, honey, you can't afford me!" she laughingly recalls. After some discussion, she joined Best Upon Request as vice president of operations in 1996. After a series of unfortunate events culminating in tragedy on September 11, 2001, Dave suggested that Tillie take over the company as CEO so he could find another source of income for the family. He felt the company needed new leadership and believed Tillie was ready for it. She quickly initiated changes that spurred extraordinary growth.

Today, Tillie manages a multi-million dollar budget and a staff of 100. Best Upon Request is recognized as one of Greater Cincinnati's fastest growing private companies, and was recently honored for the third consecutive year as one of Cincinnati Business Courier's Fast 55. Revenues have increased 447% during Tillie's tenure. In 2005, she was the first Hispanic to receive the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber's Small Business Excellence Award as Minority Business of the Year.

Behind the Scenes

The demands required to salvage and then expand a business can take a toll on family life. "It's all about priorities," Tillie says. She acknowledges the learning curve she and her family had to endure. In the early years, she recalls spending weekends buried in laundry, coming up with creative housework solutions and hiring a babysitter who cooked for the Lima clan as well as her own family's evening meal.

And they had some significant disasters, like the time one of the girls accidentally turned off the computer switch as Dave was working on Best Upon Request's business plan. "It was totally gone and he had to start all over," Tillie says. Changes clearly had to be made. "The kids started going to (the sitter's) house because it was just too chaotic," Tillie says. "I think we got better at certain things."

Dave came up with practical solutions to make their household run more efficiently. In fact, Tillie credits her husband with managing the girls and their home during the company's toughest years after she became CEO. "It was about letting go and just trusting and knowing that Dave would take care of things. And of course my way is not always the right way but I like my way," she laughs.

Letting go was a challenge Tillie had to overcome when transitioning between home and work as well. Switching gears from boss to mom was not easy. "The girls would say, 'Mom, you're not the CEO of the house, you're my mom!' I had to adjust on the way home, thinking, 'ok, I'm not the CEO now,'" she says.

Like many mothers with demanding careers, she admits struggling with long work hours that can easily encroach upon family time. In 2003 and 2004, trying to finish her day's work so she could have uninterrupted time at home led to missing family mealtimes. Dave helped her come up with another system so she could spend more time with them. He suggested she come home to have dinner together and then answer emails or tie up loose ends while the kids did homework. "It was like a little cyber cafe around the kitchen table," she laughs. Family meals together continue to be a priority in the Lima household.

"It's Not About the Career"

Having made mistakes and learned from them, Tillie has definite opinions about the pressure many mothers feel to do it all. "I love what I do; I love being a mom. My heart sort of feels sad when I hear women opting to be all about career. I think, 'oh my goodness,' at the end of the day it's not about the career. It's the relationship you have with your children..."

Tillie explains her perspective. "I call it life-work integration. It's no longer about work-life balance, because it can't happen. It's going to ebb and flow. There are some days when you have to put in those 12 hours...But when the kids know that family is a priority, they understand."

Coaching her daughter's soccer team and volunteering with the Girl Scouts kept Tillie grounded while the girls were in grade school. She currently holds positions on the boards of several nonprofit organizations and remains active with her high school alma mater, encouraging young women to make a difference beyond their own backyards.

"The journey we are on is about making a difference in the lives we touch, whether it is our employees, our clients, our vendors, our partners or our families. It is our values that determine our behaviors..." she says.

An Extraordinary Journey

Tillie's journey began when she arrived in the United States from Cuba just two months shy of her first birthday. With little more than a suitcase and no knowledge of the English language, her parents taught their six children to be resourceful, work hard and appreciate the "God-given talents that can be used to help others." She recalls her mother's "profound" encouragement and her father's "quiet confidence."

"Mom told us to stick together. It's easy to break one stick, harder to break all six," she recalls. This reliance on family, coupled with her Catholic faith, her appreciation of friends, a true understanding of freedom and the price her parents paid to "free us from a communist country," inspire Tillie to keep striving.

In Her Daughters' Eyes

To Jessica, Natalie and Sofia, watching their mother overcome obstacles has been a great source of pride and inspiration. Their praise for her is effusive. Their personal relationships are strong due to constant communication, and working with her on a professional level gives them a perspective few daughters experience. "She is my go-to person," says Jessica. "She has an answer for everything,

Tillie's Parenting Tips:

- No guilt allowed. "Kids pick that up." Whether you have a career, work at home, volunteer or do both, "you have so much to offer and the world will be a better place if kids see the contributions you are making."
- Share your values. "They watch every one of your moves so as long as you're grounded in your values, the kids are gonna pick those up."
- Make sure they contribute. By the time her girls were in high school, all were doing their own laundry and were expected to contribute to the household.
- Insist that they get involved. "We gave our kids a choice. They had to volunteer, do sports or work."
- Service builds character. "Kids, especially teenagers, think the world revolves around them." Encourage them to look beyond themselves.
- Teach them to save. The Limas insist that their children save 75% of the money they earn. Her children have learned responsibility and financed travel and pets, among other things.

but she teaches you along the way. I feel like I've learned so much from her.”

They admit that home and work life often blend in a curious way. Especially when their parents worked in the business together, the girls observed the differences in their leadership styles and were privy to many business discussions and problem-solving sessions. “There is a fine line between business and family but with us it’s intermingled and that’s sometimes frustrating but most times it’s amazing and a great learning experience,” says Natalie.

The girls have worked to find their comfortable space at work with Mom as boss, and it’s apparent that the process is evolutionary. Switching gears can be just as tricky with the girls as it is with Tillie. Jessica is careful to address her mother as “Tillie” at work, while Natalie is uncomfortable with such formality. “I just think it’s weird because she is my mom,” she says.

While they see her as a teacher and a mentor, the mother who can apply real-life lessons to textbook scenarios, the Lima girls identify Tillie’s courage and her passion as the characteristics they best wish to emulate and pass on to their own children. “She has always taught us not to be afraid, to try new things and to ask for help,” says Jessica. “Passionate is the biggest word for her,” Natalie adds. Whether she is working with an employee or a special cause, Tillie’s attitude and passion for making a difference is evident to her children.

As a reminder of her life’s mission, Tillie keeps in her office a favorite quote from Marianne Williamson’s *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*. She reads, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us...You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world...We are all meant to shine, as children do...And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

“It makes me feel so good when I see someone shine,” exclaims Tillie. Her children agree.

For more about Best Upon Request and Tillie Hidalgo Lima, check out www.bestuponrequest.com

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