

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

House takes a leap with career, life

BY H.M. CAULEY
Contributing Writer

Twenty years ago, the thought of wading into the surf or cannonballing into a pool terrified **Joni House**. But turning 39 changed her perspective. The successful corporate executive had had enough of being afraid and decided to tackle a life-long dread of the water.

"I believed if you do what you fear, you kill that fear," said House. "So I took kayaking lessons on the ocean. When I realized nothing tragic was going to happen, I fell in love with the water and the experience. Ever since, I have treasured the difference in perspective you get when you're on the water looking back at the land."

That birthday also brought another tectonic shift in perspective. During 14 years with **Delta Air Lines Inc.**, where she began as a programmer in the information technology department and ended up negotiating rates and charges for airport space around the globe, she had carved out time to earn an MBA. Armed with a solid resume and a newfound confidence, she moved out of her Delta comfort zone and joined a consulting firm.

"I realized I needed to take the leap if I wanted to solve problems and bring a fresh perspective to industries other than the airlines," she said. "I wanted to make things better, to make people love their Monday morning instead of dreading it."

A year later, when she turned 40, House took on another challenge: learning to ski. She now takes regular trips to snowy destinations to indulge her passion with friends. And it wasn't long after mastering the slopes that House was ready to expand her horizons again, this time by founding her own consulting firm, the **Grayfen Group**, a name inspired by a pilot boat she saw off the coast of Georgia.

"I saw that little boat assist larger boats navigate treacherous waters and get to a safe harbor, then go out and do it again for another boat. That was the inspiration," she said.

House led the firm for 12 years before realizing that more time was being spent managing the business than dealing with the clients. "What I really wanted to do was be a consultant," she said.

Now, as the executive vice president of **Alexander Proudfoot**, House works directly with clients to achieve financial success, improve employee performance and institute sustainable change. Her international client base may bring her into the world of financial services, food and beverage or, occasionally, airlines. But in each area, the goal is the same.

"We work with all types of clients, with any company experiencing the need to improve profitability, how its people work together, how it meets its goals, even to change its product mix,"



Joni House believes in doing what takes her out of her comfort zone, including learning the fiddle.

JOANN VITELLI

said House. "In my role, I'm asked to work with the client to understand what the underlying problem is. It's incredibly rewarding to have clients see results not only to the bottom line but to the effectiveness and overall engagement of their employees."

House has often combined the desire to make a difference with her willingness to take on challenges, no matter how daunting or frightening. A few years ago, she focused her energy on spearheading a drive to create more park land along the Chattahoochee River near to her home in East Cobb. It's a place where she gets out and kayaks or canoes as often as possible, which made her realize how endangered the area was.

"Once I started paddling out there, I started paying attention to what was happening to our rivers, so it was natural to

start supporting things like the Riverkeeper group," she said.

Sam Olens, the Georgia attorney general and former head of the Cobb County commissioners, met House in 2005 when she lobbied the county to create more greenspace along the river.

"She had had dogged determination; once she sets her mind on something, it's going to happen," said Olens. "She's very driven; she knows what she wants to get done, and she knows how to do it. While I never felt pushed or pressured, I did feel her passion and point of view, and that's a very important distinction."

House has also tapped into her talent to mentor others in her career field. **Chris Geganto**, now the director of purpose activation and experience design at **Sun-Trust**, worked with during his first job at the **North Highland Co.**

JONI HOUSE

Age: 59

Born: Gadsden, Ala.

Lives in: East Cobb

Current job: Executive Vice President, Alexander Proudfoot

Previous job: Assistant Vice President, Aricent

Education: BA, Modern Studies, Dept. of English, University of Virginia; MBA, Finance, Georgia State University; IBM/WBENC Executive Entrepreneur Program, Dartmouth College Tuck School of Business

Family: Mother, stepfather in Peachtree City; two younger sisters and brothers-in-law; two nephews, three great-nieces

Hobbies: Bluegrass fiddle, kayaking, skiing, travel

"She took me on my first sales call," Geganto recalled. "She gave me great advice, even down to 'wear a suit' and 'always be prepared with your message.' Her belief is if the client is paying you to do something, then you should give them perfection – and spend as much time as it takes to make it the best. I learned how to conduct myself professionally, but at the same time, we had fun. That was so important."

The goal of perfection has spilled into a new area of House's life. Two years ago, a chance encounter with a bluegrass jam session on the Marietta Square inspired her to pick up the fiddle and master it.

"There were clusters of people spontaneously playing this Appalachian-inspired bluegrass, and I thought it was amazing the way they listened to each other and made astounding music together," she said. "So I found an instructor and bought a fiddle, but I'm still very terrible at it because I don't have enough time to practice."

But House is working toward playing spontaneously with a group by listening carefully to what's going on around her. And that's a skill she's already honed as a consultant.

"The pivotal difference between effective and non-effective consulting is the ability to listen," she said. "I know how to read music, but in a way it has impaired my ability to hear what's happening in the moment. Learning to play by ear, to have that listening element, has been relevant to other parts of my life, and it is here, too. When you look at it, there actually is a thread to all these things in my life. It all makes sense."

▶ EXECUTIVE PROFILE

If you know any executive whose hobby – or day job – is unusual enough to be in print contact Lisa R. Schoolcraft at lschoolcraft@bizjournals.com.