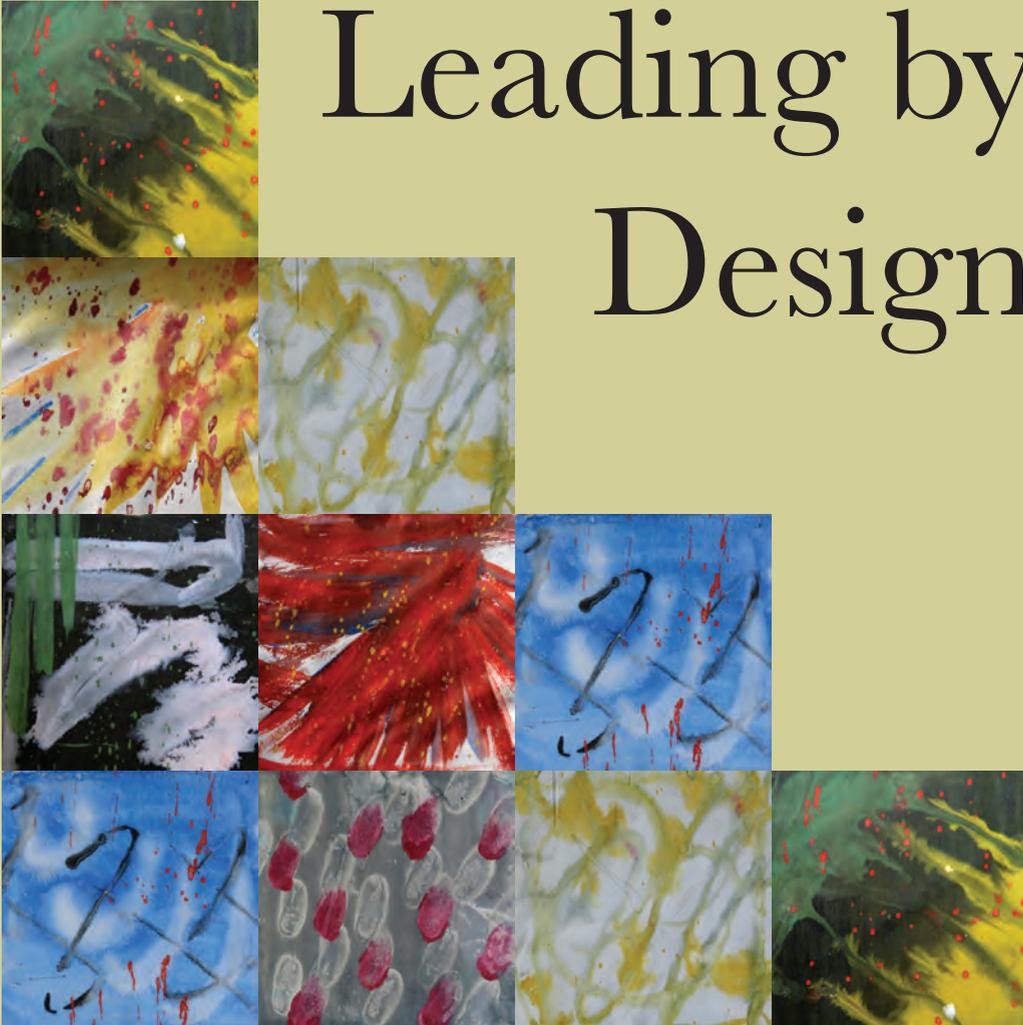


Leading by Design



A closer view of Darlene Lowe

**“The important thing in life is
to figure out what you do best and
then go with it. Be true to yourself
and don’t fake anything.”**

— Darlene Lowe

Leading by Design

One of the hallmarks of the Edward Lowe Foundation is Big Rock Valley (BRV), its 2,600-acre headquarters in southwest Michigan. From its lush landscaping and natural habitats to 19th century farmhouses and vintage railcars that have been transformed into cozy guest quarters, BRV is not only a relaxing setting but one that sparks innovative thinking — an oasis for the entrepreneurs who attend the foundation’s educational programs...

And though BRV’s sense of place is apparent, what visitors may not realize is that there is an unusual link between design and leadership: The driving force behind both the unique environment and organization is Darlene Lowe, the foundation’s chairman and co-founder.

Darlene’s creative gifts were evident at an early age. She was constantly drawing and won best-picture contests in grade school. In high school she served on decorating committees for proms, painted backdrops for stage productions and was art editor of the yearbook. During her senior year, she won a scholarship from Scholastic Magazine that enabled her to attend Albion College where she studied art.

Although Darlene’s artistic talents translate to a variety of media, her ability to create unique spaces ultimately led to a career in interior design.

For BRV she has created a “country classic” signature style that blends antiques and rustic furnishings with eclectic, contemporary elements. She also recycles materials in surprising ways, such as placing buttons on furniture or using pickle barrel slats and railroad ties to build decks. The end result: a yesteryear rural charm with a touch of formality.

To ensure that BRV visitors have a quality experience, Darlene has also established hospitality systems and standards. These range



from how facilities should be maintained to how meals should be served to how guests should be greeted.

Observers remark on Darlene's unusual ability to visualize and see the big picture. For example, Jack Pycik, a foundation board member, remembers visiting Darlene and Ed Lowe after they purchased ranch property in Arcadia, Fla. "Even when there was just tape on an open field, she knew exactly what she wanted to do," said Pycik. "She transformed it from a cow pasture to a showplace."

Mike McCuiston, the foundation's director

of physical resources, recalls paint swatches and wallpaper samples that Darlene gave him early in his career. "I would question her to make sure we had the right color, because in my mind they were too bright or eclectic," he said. "She would assure me that once everything was in place it would work out — and she was always right."

Darlene's gift for visualization isn't relegated to interiors. She has an innate flair for spatial organization and knows the best angles for buildings to face, how driveways should meet and where to place landscaping and signage.

"It's something I can't really explain — or turn off," she said. "I see everything in reverse. I'll walk through my properties and immediately notice if anything is amiss."

In fact, her children and grandchildren like to tease her by moving things around when she isn't looking. "If they place an object where it looks good, then I'll leave it, but that usually doesn't happen," said Darlene with a patient



Above: Two charcoal drawings that Darlene drew as a class exercise at Albion College.

smile. “I just wait until they leave and move things back.”

Organization and aesthetics infiltrate every aspect of Darlene’s life — even the inside of her refrigerator has eye appeal. “She can serve you a lunch of canned tuna fish and make it look gourmet,” said Doug Wyant, her youngest son. “In fact, we have an inside joke that Martha Stewart steals all of my mother’s ideas. If you watch Martha Stewart, she’s doing things that Darlene did years ago.”

“She really appreciates beautiful things — and sees beauty all around her,” said granddaughter Monica Wyant. “We’ll be sitting together in a café, and she’ll notice things that I never would, such as how the pattern on the flatware matches the curtains or the color of the chairs is the same as the front door.”

And while Darlene’s design style is instinctive, she does adhere to basic tenets, such as proportion, balance and flow. Perhaps most important, form must follow function.

“No design should outlive its usefulness,” she stressed. “As the function of a building changes, the building’s style should also change. No matter how happy you are with the original design, you must be open to changing it.”



Above and far left: Interiors at the Tower of Tomorrow reflect Darlene's "country classic" style developed for BRV. Immediate left: Darlene at the opening of the Tower, joined by her son Dan Wyant on the left and by John Pairitz, a former foundation member and trustee, on the right.

“I felt that it was a real blessing to raise my children on a farm. You learn to have compassion for living things and to see how everything is intertwined.”

Being open to change is more than a design principle for Darlene. It’s been a way of life.

In her sophomore year at Albion College, she became engaged to Riley Wyant and left school to earn money for the marriage. From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. she worked as a bank teller in Three Rivers, Mich. Then she worked as a carhop at a local drive-in until midnight, when she went to babysit three young children while their mother, a hospital nurse, worked the night shift. The proceeds from this trio of jobs were used to buy a tractor for the farm that Darlene and Riley leased.

“Darlene is one of the hardest-working people I’ve ever known,” said childhood friend Sheila Haring. “And she’s very determined. She has a vision and nothing is going to stop her, although because she’s so quiet, you might not realize how dedicated she is.”

This tenacity served Darlene well, because before marrying Wyant, her exposure to farm life was minimal. “I didn’t even know what a plow was,” she said.

That changed quickly.

On their farm, the Wyants raised several hundred hogs and 3,000 chickens. Among her daily responsibilities, Darlene collected the eggs, candled and graded them, and then packed them in crates and delivered them to nearby groceries and restaurants — a route she ran even when her children were toddlers.

In addition to the egg business, Darlene learned about livestock. She became a 4-H leader and helped her three children (and later, her grandchildren) raise and show purebred hogs.

“I remember when I was about 10 years old and my mother drove me to a national hog show in Columbia, Mo.,” reminisced Dan Wyant, her oldest son. “We won our class and sold a purebred gilt for \$1,000, which put our family on the map in terms of livestock.”

Although a newcomer to the show circuit, Darlene soon became a recognized expert. She was frequently recruited to be a judge at regional livestock shows, served on the board of the National Pork Producers Council, and helped found one of the first statewide

auxilliary councils for women.

“Farm life is hard because you can never take a day off — even on a holiday,” she said. “But I felt that it was a real blessing to raise my children on a farm. You learn to have compassion for living things and to see how everything is intertwined. Your livelihood depends on their well-being.”

Even with the burden of farm chores, Darlene found time for design. Using ingenuity to compensate for a shoestring budget, she transformed her farmhouses into showplaces.

“Darlene and I both married and had our first babies about the same time,” said Jean Swindell, a friend since high school days. “I remember visiting her first farmhouse, which was adorable. She would make beautiful curtains from a bolt of fabric she had found on sale somewhere or paint chairs that had been in someone’s attic and create something out of nothing.”

With a growing reputation for her interior design skills, Darlene was asked to teach an adult education class at Southwestern Michigan College. Yet after three years of classes, Darlene realized what she really wanted was not to teach, but to open her own design practice.

Darlene launched Haymarket Interiors (named after one of the first fabric patterns she used for a client) in the late 1960s. With her endless energy and organizational savvy,



Two generations of champions. Top: Darlene with granddaughters Kale, Baily and Branna Wyant at the 2000 Cass County Fair. Next: her daughter, Shawn, and two sons, Dan and Doug, at the Cass County Fair during the 1970s.

she balanced farm life with her design business, running Haymarket out of her Dowagiac farmhouse and juggling up to 12 clients at a time. Projects included offices, churches and cottages, but were primarily residential homes.

Opening Haymarket led to another pivotal moment in her life — meeting Ed Lowe.

Darlene first encountered Ed while she was standing on a ladder and wallpapering the kitchen in a client's home in Cassopolis. The client, Tom Thorburn, was one of Ed's employees and rented the house from him. This chance meeting led to Darlene's involvement in numerous projects for Edward Lowe Industries (ELI), ranging from office renovations to the creation of Jones is Back, a tourist attraction.

Although a personal relationship did not move as fast as their professional one, there was an immediate attraction. Ed later wrote “I did not fall in love ... love hit me like a quiet, private, spine-tingling bolt of lightning.” He extols Darlene's beauty, talent, inexhaustible energy, self-control and sense of humor. Finally, he writes: “Darlene understands me. This is like finding a fountain of water after a lifetime in the desert.”

Ed's ambition and drive were magnets for Darlene — and more closely complemented her own temperament. “Riley and I were badly matched,” she explained. “I was very aggressive, and he was very laid back. The difference in our personalities became a larger gap as the years passed.”

After working together for several years and eventually divorcing their respective spouses, Ed and Darlene married in 1976.

In 1981 Darlene formally incorporated her design business as Haymarket Antiques and Designs Inc. and opened a retail store that sold antiques and accessories on Decatur Road in Cassopolis. She also became vice president of design and facilities for ELI, and over a 20-year period, she completed 82 projects for the corporation.

Those projects frequently involved more than interior design. “Ed and I shared a passion for building and restoration,” she explained. “Yet while he was typically the architect and had a vision for the structure, I would often finish the project because he would be moving on to something else.”

She was also involved in key ELI meetings — and often was the only woman in the boardroom. “Darlene had a very calming influence on Ed,” said Pycik. “She was his confidante, and he trusted her completely.”

Indeed, the two even had a silent communications system, which involved a paper clip. During meetings they always sat next to each other and placed a paper clip between them. If either one thought the other was speaking too freely, they moved the metal clip, which signaled “enough said.”



Left: Ed and Darlene at Billieville, a section of BRV named after Darlene's middle name. Above: The Barn House, one of the many renovation projects that Ed and Darlene undertook — which also served as their primary residence at BRV.

“She commands respect, but it’s not fear-based. She doesn’t give advice by getting mad or being forceful. You simply don’t want to disappoint her.”

After Ed’s death in 1995, Darlene took over as chairman of the Edward Lowe Foundation, which the couple had launched in 1985. (ELI had been sold in 1990.) Although Darlene’s boardroom style was a considerable contrast to Ed’s, observers praise her leadership skills.

“I was amazed at how effortlessly she ran the foundation board meetings,” said Haring, who served on the foundation’s board of trustees from 1997 to 1999. “She encouraged people to come up with ideas, but knew when to throw in her own. If something was running too long, she didn’t hesitate to speak up, but she also knew when to let an issue ride if the board was really picking up on something. She’s in charge without you knowing that she’s in charge.”

Others praise Darlene for being flexible while simultaneously preserving Ed’s vision for the foundation and preventing mission drift.

“When Darlene sees something off target, she steps in,” said Murray Swindell, who joined the foundation’s board in 2000. “I think she

has kept focus better than anyone as to what we’re there for and what we’re trying to do.”

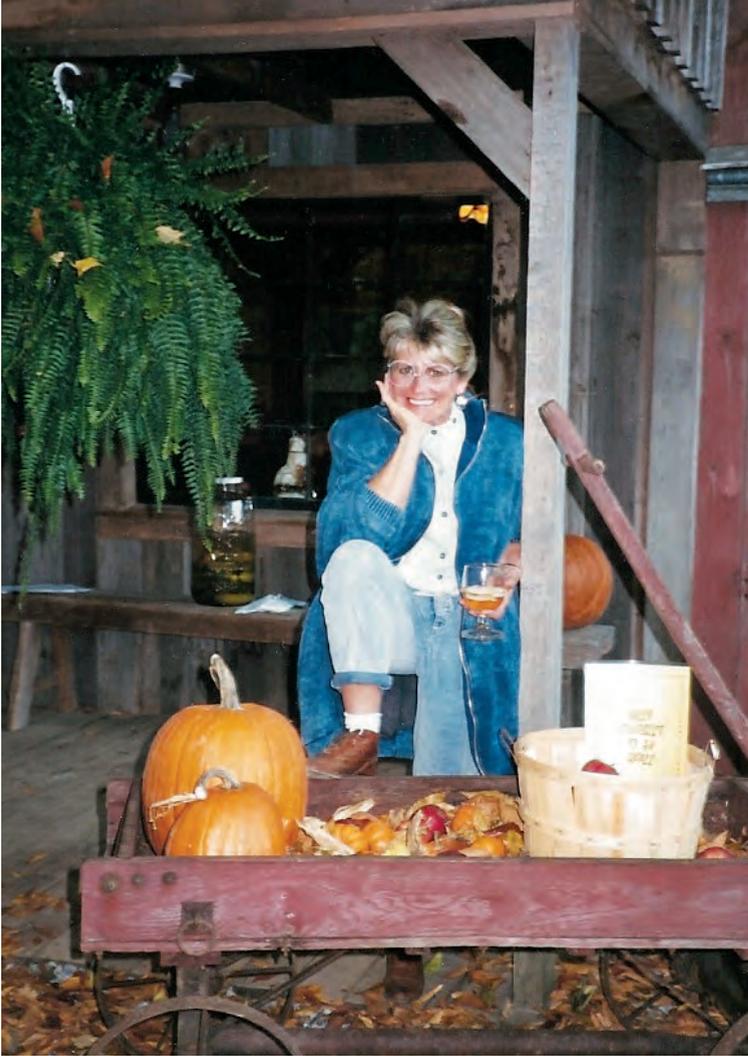
Swindell also praised her ability to recruit high-caliber employees. “She has excellent instincts,” he said. “She can spot a phony — and she can spot people with real talent and integrity.”

McCuiestion refers to Darlene’s diplomatic finesse: “She is an excellent statesman and irons out tricky situations with tact. She appreciates the importance of the different programs and does an excellent job of allocating resources.”

And unlike many CEOs, micromanaging doesn’t figure into her M.O. “Darlene sets big goals, but lets you do your job,” McCuiestion explained. “She has a strong work ethic and wants results, but gives people time to deliver them.”

Both family and foundation staff remark on Darlene’s ability to motivate others and inspire loyalty.

“I’ve always believed my mother would be a great politician,” said Dan Wyant. “She has a special charisma about her. When you meet her,



Left: Darlene at a foundation employee party at Billieville during the the mid-1980s. Above: Darlene with Ed and her family at the Caboose, one of the vintage railcars that Ed bought and placed in Billieville.

she exudes energy and passion about the things she's pursuing. She also has a unique ability to connect with people; she's genuinely interested in you and able to draw you out."

"She commands respect, but it's not fear-based," said Doug Wyant. "She doesn't give advice by getting mad or being forceful. You simply don't want to disappoint her. People are

very loyal to her."

Kathy Browning, the foundation's director of administration has been working for Darlene since 1983. "She is perhaps the most positive person I've ever met," said Browning. "Her attitude is inspiring, and she has given me a sense of empowerment that I can do anything I set my mind to."

Athletics to antiques

A somewhat surprising contrast to Darlene's low-key leadership style and artistic pursuits is her enthusiasm for athletics. During grade school she could outrun all the boys, and in high school she excelled at basketball, volleyball and softball.

Croquet has been a lifelong passion. Taught by her father in their backyard, Darlene won a citywide championship (in both singles and doubles) for four straight years during grade school. She continues to enjoy the sport today with friends and family on a permanent croquet court at her Diamond Lake home.

"She's fiercely competitive. You can see it in her face when she's playing croquet — she locks in and she's in the zone," said grandson Jordan Wyant. "In fact, the croquet court is probably the only time I've ever seen

her be intimidating."

Darlene is also a big fan of college and professional sports, and one of Jordan's fondest memories is when he was 10 years old and his grandmother took him to his first Chicago Bulls game. "Today if I walk into her house on a Saturday, she's usually watching a baseball game

or golf match," he said. "She's very up to speed on the sports world and knows all the rankings and statistics."

Less surprising is Darlene's affinity for antiques. Over the years she has amassed a top-notch collection of Americana art and antiques — including one of the best collections of 19th-century painted furniture in the country.

Indeed, with the exception of upholstered pieces, her house on Diamond Lake is furnished almost exclusively with antiques — ranging from large armoires to a collection of Civil War canteens to a 200-year-old Chippendale mirror. "I love their historic appeal," Darlene said. "I like to imagine where they came from, who made them and how they were cared for."

As with other areas of her life, Darlene is decisive as a collector and has an unerring eye for quality.

"She buys what she likes regardless of whose signature is on it," said Doug Wyant, an antiques dealer who frequently attends shows and auctions with his mother. "Even if the work is by a famous artisan, she won't buy it if she doesn't like it."

"And she doesn't buy just to acquire," he added. "She knows she can use it before she gets it home. She can picture in her mind if it will work."





This page: Interiors at Darlene's home on Diamond Lake in Cassopolis illustrate her love of antiques and whimsical touches, such as the thread cabinet hanging behind her office desk in the top photo. Opposite page: The croquet court outside the Diamond Lake home.

“She can give me advice on how to show a hog at the county fair, and she can take me into a designer boutique in Paris...She’s comfortable in both worlds.”

Family is a priority for Darlene. She loves to organize get-togethers — from ski trips in Aspen to reunions at her Florida ranch to taking her four granddaughters to Paris for shopping and girl talk. In October 2011, when Darlene rang the closing bell at the NASDAQ stock exchange, her family joined her in Manhattan.

Although they call her “Grandma Dar,” she’s no stereotypical relative, say her grandchildren.

“She is the most creative person I know,” said granddaughter Monica Wyant, recalling endless craft projects with her grandmother as a child. “She’s also one of the most fashionable people I know. Whenever I borrow something or get one of her hand-me-downs, my friends always take notice and want to know where I got it. I’m constantly admitting that she knows more about current trends than I do.”

Indeed, Baily Wyant, Monica’s cousin, says that she brings her friends to “Grandma Dar” for fashion advice. “She has fantastic taste

in clothes, and you can spend hours in her closets,” said Baily.

Yet what her grandchildren value most is how young at heart Darlene is. “She’s always ready to listen to us and remembers how it felt to go through similar experiences when she was my age,” observed Monica.

“You never have to worry that she’ll embarrass you by bringing up something about your past,” Baily said. “She’s supportive of us in a very individual way, and she’s up to speed with current times.”

Her grandmother is both a great listener and gifted storyteller, Baily continued. “She can talk about anything — and she remembers small details about the places she’s been to and people she has met. She also has this ability to engage people and get them excited about their own stories.”

Baily also appreciates how multifaceted her grandmother is: “She can give me advice on how to show a hog at the county fair, and she can take me into a designer boutique in



Left: Joined by family members and foundation staff, Darlene rang NASDAQ's closing bell on Oct. 4, 2011, to celebrate a new research partnership between the NASDAQ OMX Educational Foundation and the Edward Lowe Foundation. Below: Darlene and her granddaughters enjoy a night on the town in Paris.



Paris and help me find the right outfit. She's comfortable in both worlds."

On a similar note, Doug Wyant remarks on Darlene's ability to take on new challenges. "My mother is a real go-getter who can adapt to anything," he observed. "She didn't know anything about being a farmer's wife, but she did it. She learned how to run an interior design business, how to be an antiques dealer, how to run a large corporation with Ed — and how to lead a foundation."

Darlene herself views these accomplishments as less remarkable. "I didn't know I could fail, and that ignorance has been one of my biggest blessings," she said. "I never tackled anything without believing that I could make it work. When problems arose, I simply focused on the best way to solve them."

"I think the important thing in life is to figure out what you do best and then go with it," she added. "Be true to yourself and don't fake anything."



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On the cover: A series of watercolors that Darlene Lowe painted while studying art at Albion College. For this class exercise, students were asked to create paintings that illustrated several different adjectives such as hot, airy, explosive and murky.