

Behind the scenes

# Coffee communicator

From Tokyo to Sodo, executive Wanda Herndon crafted Starbucks' message

With 40 million of us heading for Starbucks every week, most of us deal with baristas feverishly turning out those tall nonfat whatever. We don't see many behind-the-scenes Starbucksians, and so I thought it was interesting when I heard Starbucks' Senior Vice President of Global Communications Wanda Herndon was retiring. Why not get the take on someone you don't ordinarily see in action?

Wanda Herndon is a 53-year-old African-American dynamo whose personality is the opposite of decaf, although that's what she drinks.

I met with her at a Starbucks near company headquarters recently, where we munched on breakfast sandwiches, and where she shook more hands and drew more attention than an Olympic gold medalist.

Recruited to come to work in Seattle in 1995, she started as vice president of communications and public affairs. She had been at Dupont for five years in communications, and previously at Dow Chemical for 12 years, "the first African-American hired into corporate communications at Dow," she says.

Now, as she looks back on her time at Starbucks, she has seen the company grow from several hundred stores in North America to almost 11,000 stores worldwide.

In fact, Herndon was with the leadership team in 1996, when the company opened its first store outside North America. "It was in Tokyo's Ginza dis-

trict," she says. "I remember it was August, around my birthday. It was so very hot, and yet people were standing in line to get in for coffee," she says. "I was blown away at the whole experience." The excitement of seeing the reception for Starbucks in this first international reach, and realizing she was right in the middle of being part of the history of the company, is for her an indelible memory.

Reluctant to talk about herself ("I'm always behind the scenes, you've got to understand," she explains firmly), she describes what she believes it takes to work for Starbucks. "Real people who have a sense of humanity," she says. "High energy people, able to turn on a dime, able to connect with others, have strong values, honest, humane and passionate." Herndon is the mirror image of this, plus tough.

She recalls her first meeting with Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz, then her boss-to-be. A girlfriend had shown her a magazine picture of Schultz, dressed in khakis, posing for a Gap Inc. ad. "So I knew what he looked like, and when I pulled up (to headquarters) in a cab, there he was running down the steps. I said, 'Hi, Howard.' He asked if we knew each other, and I said I was here for an interview later in the day."

Later that afternoon, during the interview, he surprised her. "He asked me if I drank coffee. That was not the kind of interview question you get at

Dupont and Dow. ... What I remember most was that he was engaging, and genuinely interested in who I was."

Herndon says the tone set in that interview carried throughout her years there. "They don't care if your hair is green or orange, your skin is brown or white, as long as you believe in the company and its mission. And that was not always the case in my whole life," she says. "Some people can see you and make a judgment about you without seeing what you can really do."

"I have felt embraced from the day I walked in, and that my contribution was not only valued and welcomed, but expected."

Schultz will miss her. "She has meant so much to us here at Starbucks. She has been vital and important part of this team," he says.

Since her first day Herndon has provided strategic communications counsel for the entire company, working closely with Schultz and the entire leadership group. She and her team have executed the communications portion of every Starbucks major event and activity.

Among times she will never forget is the day of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Herndon was in New York with colleague Mary Williams, the company's senior vice president of coffee, driving to the airport when they saw smoke rising from the World Trade Center's twin towers. "I called Howard at home and told him to turn on the television," she says. Like everyone else, Herndon was in shock as she helped mobilize a crisis plan. "We closed all the stores in North America that day. Because we felt everyone had been affected, all our partners, we all had a connection to that tragedy ... and after we reopened, Starbucks became a place of refuge, a gathering place with a heightened sense of community."

A lighter memory is the time she was driving in front of Schultz, leading him to a location for a speech. "He is one of the most punctual people I know," she says. "Always on time. But I am directionally challenged," she says with a laugh, "even with maps." And so, for what seemed forever to her, she led him down one wrong street after another, "with the chairman following



Patti Payne

me in his car. I had no idea how agitated he must have been." They somehow made it on time. "God was lookin' out for me," she says with a grin.

She believes communicating the Starbucks story is an ongoing challenge. "We are not a typical corporation," she says. "We're big, but we stay small in that every customer and partner (employee) is important to us." She says it may sound like Pollyanna, but it's a company fact.

"We pay health benefits to full- and part-time employees; everyone gets stock options and shares in the success of this company," she says. "I'm living proof of that — retiring at 53. We give back to communities all over the world; we're on the forefront of bringing our stores into areas where there is no high-end retail, where many big businesses have chosen not to locate."

She continues about everything from Starbucks building schools in grower countries, to education grants and its literacy programs, to the company sending teams into disaster zones, such as the areas Katrina hit, or the tsunami-torn region of South Asia. "It's all about connecting with people to become part of their lives," she says.

So as she moves into retirement this August, Herndon will continue to work out as she does now in Starbucks' Java Gym, divide time between her homes here and in Arizona, and continue her extensive community board work. She will stay on as a minority owner of the Sonics and Storm and on the board of The Basketball Club of Seattle LLC, which owns both teams.

But Herndon may fool herself if she thinks she is heading into full retirement. "She may think she is retiring," says Schultz, with a smile in his voice, "but she hasn't heard the last of me yet."

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STARBUCKS COFFEE CO. PHOTO/NICK GUNDERSON

Wanda Herndon, senior vice president of Starbucks Corp. and Howard Schultz, chairman of Starbucks, at the company's annual shareholders meeting on Feb. 8 at Marion Oliver McCaw Hall at the Seattle Center.

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