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THE REAL DEAL



DYNAMIC DUO

THE POWERHOUSE FEMALE CEOS OF VISIT SANTA BARBARA AND SB CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ARE SPEARHEADING THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY WITH THEIR LATEST INSPIRATION CAMPAIGN—AND LONGSTANDING FRIENDSHIP

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One of life's profound pleasures is to stumble across a pairing so divine in nature that it simply makes sense. Tequila and lime. Bread and butter. Bonnie and Clyde. Kristen and Kathy. While these matching "K" names may evoke associations with the Kardashian clan (of which they're not members), these dynamite female figures are influencers in their own right. The duo is spearheading efforts to reinvigorate Santa Barbara's booming tourism industry, with an inspiration campaign demonstrating the lifelong benefits of careers in hospitality. As CEOs of Visit Santa Barbara and the Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce, respectively, they're working two sides of the same coin—though it's not only their individual talents, but an extraordinary friendship that secures their spot as the women of the hour.

As President and CEO of Visit Santa Barbara, Kathy Janega-Dykes leads her organization in pouring out al fresco dining guides, swoon-worthy photograph spots, and where to indulge in wellness weekends from Summerland to Goleta. You've probably stumbled across its Instagram page, where decadent brunch spreads and stunning riviera vistas provoke excited comments from its 136,000 loyal followers. While Visit Santa Barbara is first and foremost a destination marketing organization whose primary mission is to inspire sustainable tourism, it's also so much more—strategically attracting visitors to support the local business community, while advocating its needs to maintain an optimal quality of life.

"On my favorite days, I'm certainly the eyes and ears of the company, looking for new ways to help the community residents, our employees, and certainly our business owners reach their

maximum potential through all of our work," says Kathy, whose grand total of 18 years at Visit Santa Barbara has provided her unparalleled insights to the county's inner workings.

Enter trusted confidante Kristen Miller, who recently celebrated her 20 year anniversary at the Chamber of Commerce. After the merger of the Goleta, Santa Barbara, and Carpinteria Chambers of Commerce in 2020, Kristen found herself as the CEO of this new, streamlined organization. The Chamber's primary goal is to improve the local economy and job market with a large focus on hospitality, but also through a thriving technology and manufacturing industry. "Yes, we're absolutely working towards the same goals," Kristen says of the Chamber and Visit Santa Barbara. "But we have lanes that we stay in." Kathy is promoting to the rest of the world, Kristen is focused on what happens once visitors actually arrive. "It's our responsibility to hand them a map, make sure that they go to our stores, make sure they eat in our restaurants, and make sure they come back for another visit," she says.

The two have recently joined forces for Santa Barbara's newest hospitality project, an "inspiration campaign" featuring the success stories of real employees and residents who've worked their way up the hospitality ladder. Kristen is quick to clarify: this is not a job fair or a research study. "When you talk about inspiring people, we immediately went to the idea of stories," she remarks. SB Chamber's website reveals a myriad of such stories, undoctored and authentic, to demonstrate the potential trajectory of a career in hospitality. It highlights employees, for example, who started as food runners and became front of

Kristen Miller, Santa Barbara Chamber of Commerce President & CEO
LaPointe sweater & pants, Allora by Laura
Dee Ocleppo heels



house managers, and line cooks who became top chefs. Take Skip Abed, who used to clean boats and teach sailing lessons as a young man at Santa Barbara Sailing Center. He's now the owner.

"The best way to inspire people and bring back the panache, the je ne sais quoi, the esprit de corps, of being in the hospitality industry is not by looking at a job listing and what the requirements are," Kristen says with gusto. "It's by hearing the story of someone who started as a gardener, and then became the general manager. Or started as a line cook, and ended up being a chef."

This campaign comes at a desperate time, born out of feedback from local businesses that couldn't reopen after the pandemic—not for lack of demand, but because of staff vacancies. Hospitality, of course, was the industry hardest hit by the pandemic on a national scale, though Santa Barbara's labor shortage has only exacerbated the struggle to bounce back. As Kristen points out, Santa Barbara is not a "big city," and therefore lacks an endless supply of workers to pull from. "Access to a qualified workforce," she says, has always been one of the Chamber's top three barriers to business. Once hotels began to reopen for leisure travel, Kathy's Visit Santa Barbara had two goals. "Save as many jobs as possible, and save as many businesses as possible." Though lofty, these goals harken back to the promise of economic vitality in Santa Barbara's 25,000 hospitality jobs, and in its supremacy as a world-renowned tourist destination.

Kathy explains that the campaign's goals are also twofold: firstly, to employ as many people in hospitality as soon as possible, and secondly, to inspire people to consider hospitality career opportunities in the long-term. "My hope for this campaign is that we can match students, workers, and even retirees with opportunities that they would enjoy and find meaningful for their lives," she says. "For many, these opportunities can lead to long-term careers, but others may right now just have their needs built with short term job opportunities." Whether it's recent graduates or serious professionals, native residents or

international immigrants, the hospitality industry is welcome to all.

Another fascinating aspect to watch, in addition to the campaign's digital influence and in-person career events, will be its progress in education advocacy. "That's the more long term work that we want to do with schools, colleges, and other agencies and institutions to build a better pipeline for people around this industry." They hope to include Santa Barbara City College's culinary school, classes at UC Santa Barbara, and county-wide high school programs within their prospects. "We need to be doing a better job of reaching down into the youth and the people who already live here, and inspiring them to be in this industry," Kristen says, adding that this part of the campaign will be less flashy and obvious, "but it's serious behind the scenes work that needs to happen."

For both CEOs, a day in the life certainly epitomizes variety. At the Chamber, Kristen's day to day involves relationship building with government and elected officials, meeting with members on obstacles, and celebrating community successes with ceremonies such as ribbon cuttings. "One of the best things, if not the best thing about this career that I'm in, is the creativity," Kristen says. With a unique background in the fine arts, she's found her transition to business to be surprisingly creative, with simply a different execution. "Every day, what I learn, who I meet, what we talk about, creates an inspiration where we want to do something creative to respond."

Kathy is similarly grateful for her high profile position within the community. "I feel very privileged to represent Santa Barbara in my capacity. In my role as CEO, I oversee an extremely talented team that markets travel to the Santa Barbara South Coast," she says, working at once with journalists, marketing and PR teams, paid advertising and social media campaigns, website content, and more. "I enjoy working with all of our community stakeholders, along with the Chamber, to continue to protect the reputation and experience of the destination brand, and certainly

manage development and change responsibly,” Kathy says. “It’s really about balancing outcomes for our residents, workers and our employers.”

The duo, like their respective organizations, have a symbiotic relationship—Kathy and Kristen both admit the other is always top of mind. They’ve been at this together for some 18 odd years, though it’s hard for them to keep track. “I’ve just respected the heck out of what she’s been able to do there, and how she does it, and what they’ve been able to accomplish,” Kristen says of Kathy and Visit Santa Barbara.

In what ways specifically, I ask? “One is that she is so passionate and so competent, and so efficient.” Another is how laser-focused her organization is. Nonprofits can oftentimes be “driving around the highway, bumping into each other,” Kristen jokes. “We don’t.” With clearly defined lanes, Visit Santa Barbara sticks to destination marketing and creating a tourism “brand” for visitors and residents alike, while the Chamber focuses on “the local economy and jobs, building communities that have a strong base of business.”

There’s no doubt how much each comrade appreciates the other. “It’s way more fun when you just admire somebody’s drive and her abilities, but also that it’s working,” Kristen says. “And I think she feels the same way. I hope so,” she laughs. Kathy confirms this sentiment, commenting, “Certainly we can’t do it without each other.”

For both, it all comes back to an undying love for the community of Santa Barbara. “We don’t like to say we have it all,” says Kathy. “But frankly, we have anything from wine tasting, to water activities, to whale watching, to theater, to concerts, et cetera. People are really looking for this destination that provides an incredible amount of experiences, and something for every member of their traveling party.”

Santa Barbara has always been known, she adds, for its excellent customer service towards both its visitors and residents. “I believe this is one of the

differentiators that Santa Barbara offers compared to our competitors,” says Kathy. “I always encourage our residents to be tourists in their own backyard.”

One of the campaign’s most inspiring stories features Jose Yupanqui, Director of Housekeeping at The Ritz-Carlton Bacara. A former house attendant at a JW Marriott in Lima, Peru, he used to polish floors and shampoo carpets. Now, he leads the Bacara’s housekeeping team in making a stunning impression on guests with their in-room goods and amenities. The Chamber posits that Jose believes he’ll reach

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his next dream, becoming General Manager of a property, because “the hospitality industry is a place where everyone can contribute and thrive, regardless of their background, ethnicity, religion, or social status. It’s a place for everyone to call home.”

I ask both Kathy and Kristen their thoughts on this sentiment. “I am not surprised that Jose said something so elegant, and eloquent,” Kristen reflects. “I can’t think of a better way to get paid and get trained, and work with the public, and work on a team that means a lot to you, while also improving somebody’s life. Because they came on a trip here and ate in a restaurant, or had an experience with a retail clerk or a concierge, that made them feel good.”

It all harkens back to one palpable philosophy—the people make the place. Kathy and Kristen are both living, breathing examples of the human dedication and drive keeping Santa Barbara top of mind for visitors all around the world. Kathy reflects, “I’m very fortunate that I’ve traveled a considerable amount in my lifetime, and certainly there is still no place like Santa Barbara.” She’s right—and this dynamic duo will keep it that way, for a long time to come.*

