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## New Griffiths Member Given Volunteer Award

This month, Susan Combs (B.S. HRM) was recognized with the Mizzou GOLD (graduate of the last decade) award by the Mizzou Alumni Association.

Susan is a new Griffiths Society member and along with her professional and volunteering accomplishments, she says mentors have provided invaluable perspective for her in her life.

"My father, Roger Combs, who is a retired 2 Star General, had me engage with people of all walks of life at a young age," Susan explains. "This has provided invaluable in business for me, in that I have clients that are the small mom-and-pop store on the corner to famous actors and actresses as clients. He taught me that people are people no matter where they come from you can find a way to connect to them."

While earning her degree, Susan began her career as an Event Coordinator for Vail Resorts during summer break. The company wanted her to stay, but she knew it was best for her to return and earn her degree. During her senior year she worked at the Hearnes Center as Assistant Event Manager for clients such as Sesame Street Live, Destiny's Child, Kenny Rogers, Bob Dylan, and the University of Missouri Athletic Department.

In 2001, after obtaining her BS in Hotel and Restaurant Management from MU, Susan was destined for New York City with an offer to be a Banquet Manager at the Marriott World Trade Center.

"But a week before my job started they did a budget revamping and decided to have two Banquet Managers instead of three," she explains. "They came back and offered me positions in Detroit and New Orleans, but I had my heart set on New York City so I came anyway without a job. I was offered two other jobs in catering and banquets for two hotels but then I started thinking about quality of life, never having a traditional weekend and having to work until 3 a.m. and having to be back at 6 a.m. for the next work day so I passed on both of these."

When a recruiter encouraged her to meet with Paychex for a sales position, her reaction was "I'm not a slimy sales person, I'm banquets, events, catering." But after taking the position of Worker's Compensation expert she became the leading sales person in her region, and the company called on her to revamp the Kansas City office. Then she was called back to New York to become the Special Advisor to Employee Benefits at the DeWitt Stern Group, LLC, the leading entertainment broker in the United States. Combs credits this change in her plan with giving her the first exposure to the insurance industry.

"Michael Keene was my Faculty Advisor in the HRM department and I was his TA in Professional Bar & Beverage Management and he was my professor with Food Production 235. That class hands down was the most valuable class I ever took. It made you learn how to plan ahead and figure things out when things do not go according to that plan. That's a huge life lesson," she says.

In 2005, Susan formed Combs & Company, a full service insurance brokerage firm, specializing in life, health, and property and casualty. Susan features a broad product portfolio and is licensed with more than 20 life and health insurance carriers and 40 property and casualty carriers.

"With insurance, no one says 'When I grow up, I want to be an Insurance Broker.' Either your family owns a business or you fall into it like I did. It's an excellent industry and I believe it is a place of advancement for women. It is still a "Gentleman's Club" so there is nowhere to go but through the glass ceiling for women who want to excel. By opening my own firm I have been able to merge both things I do well, insurance and dealing with entertainers and hospitality people."

Combs & Company now services more than 300 clients, with almost 50% being in the hospitality and entertainment industries.

"Jim Cosaras is the gentleman that encouraged me to open my own business over six years ago. He

taught me the ropes of the business and pushed me and told me that I could do it when I didn't think there was any way I could. Over six years later I am 100% certain that I made the right move and I cannot image doing anything else," Susan says.

Susan lives in Murray Hill with her husband, Sean. Her parents still live in her hometown, while her oldest brother, David, works with the Department of Mental Health in Kansas, and older brother, Matt, is an oncology RN in St. Joseph, MO where he resides with his wife Joan.

To serve both her career and volunteering causes, Susan says her approach is one of balance.

"I have a pretty strict policy of when it comes into my inbox. I handle it as soon as possible whether it be volunteer or business. I do not prioritize volunteer work over business work I just try to be efficient as I can. If I need to carve out more time for things I do and then I stick to the schedule. I treat board and volunteer meetings like work meetings, I do not show up late and I do not cancel," she says.

One of the causes she dedicates her time to includes the Children's Aid Society, which for more than 150 years has helped children in poverty to succeed and thrive and is credited for the idea of Foster Care. The organization has programs from after school programs, camps, medical clinics, mentoring, college prep and more.

"I also help to teach women's self defense classes in New York City. I think it is every woman's responsibility to have a basic knowledge of self defense and be able to handle herself should danger arise," Susan explains.

With the recognition of the GOLD award, Susan is one of six individuals given leader of the year awards presented annually at the Mizzou Alumni Association leaders' day celebration.

"The Mizzou Alumni Association is a volunteer driven organization that supports the best interests and traditions of the University of Missouri. Our mission is to marshal alumni enthusiasm in support of MU and Susan Combs is a leading ambassador for us in doing exactly that," says Jayson Meyer, who oversees the program and plans its training. "From recruiting members to organizing athletic teams to hosting picnics in New York's Central Park, Susan is a multitalented alumni leader that works tirelessly on behalf of Mizzou."

According to one of her MizzouNYC Alumni Chapter nominators, "Susan is, without question, one of the most dedicated volunteers for Mizzou. Her organization, drive, and ability to bring people together have improved the value of MizzouNYC and the Mizzou Alumni Association."

As for her advice to fellow Griffiths members, Susan encourages those collegiate members to earn their degree and leave MU with an open mind.

"80% of you will not use your college degree the way you ever imagined. Go for the jobs that you think you are under qualified for. You may surprise yourself," she says.

And for her alumni peers, Susan says, "My business has been built on 90% of my networking efforts. By starting out within the Mizzou network, you will have an instant connection with the person because of the common background, this will lay the groundwork for your professional career going forward and teach you a lot."