

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE COMMUNITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREN ASHTON

By: Judy Conder and Diane B. Hartman*

Introduction

In the business world, many entrepreneurs dream big; but few turn the dream into reality. In Northern Utah County, Karen and Alan Ashton are trying to do just that—again. The first venture was WordPerfect and the second is Thanksgiving Point—the state’s largest resort (Eddington, 2001), which is located off I-15 Exit 287 in Lehi, Utah.

The resort opened in 1995 and has grown to include the 55-acre Thanksgiving Gardens; Children’s Discovery Garden; Garden Visitor Center; Waterfall Amphitheatre; Farm County (animal farm, pony rides, etc.); North American Museum of Ancient Life (museum, IWERKS Theatre, etc.); Electric Park Fairgrounds and Special Events Complex; The Barn (concerts and banquets); The Village at Thanksgiving Point (shops, restaurants, art gallery, etc.); Thanksgiving Point Golf and Club House; Movie Complex; and Business Park.

WordPerfect

When Alan Ashton stepped down as president of WordPerfect Corporation, prior to its merger with Novell in 1994, he and Karen planned Thanksgiving Point as “. . . a focal point for our expression of thankfulness to the Lord for our bounteous blessings (Associated Press, 1995). During an interview, Karen (2003) explained that during the “WordPerfect days,” Alan was a busy CEO who traveled all over the country; and she was busy taking care of their 11 children. She states that “One of the reasons for starting Word Perfect was to give the children an opportunity to be employed before they went to school.” To accomplish this, Karen took them in Wednesday nights and Saturday mornings to clean. The Ashtons view this venture as a success not because of the wealth they accumulated, but more importantly because the family remained solid. “I watched a lot of families in our same circumstances dissolve with the pressures that came from what was called success, and we felt that our greatest success was keeping our family in tact.”

Thanksgiving Point: Dream to Reality

At Thanksgiving Point, Karen Ashton is actively involved; and because she’s actively involved, the resort focuses on a world-class garden. She states that in the beginning they were looking for financial diversification, but “what started out to be an investment in real estate” had to include a garden. “I love gardens; they’re important to me At the

end of the day I love to walk outside. I can never be in a building where I don’t see the outside.” Her love of gardens is long standing: “When Karen Ashton was a young housewife, busy raising a large and active family, she often would dream of having a wonderful garden” (Salt Lake Tribune, 1997). The 55-acres were planned to “rival the famous gardens of Europe in diversity, color, and scope (Associated Press, 1995) and are modeled after the Butchart Gardens on Vancouver Island north of Victoria, British Columbia (Salt Lake Tribune, 1999). Today the 55 acres includes 12 Theme Gardens containing 14,000 mature trees; 250,000 flowering bulbs (Thanksgiving Point, 2003); and 60-foot waterfalls, which are patterned after Bridal Veil falls in Provo Canyon (The Salt Lake Tribune, 2001).

Karen Ashton is very pleased with the gardens. “I knew children loved to garden, but I had no idea how hungry they really were for a garden. They’ll go out in the garden and run along the paths, and they’ll sprawl out in the grass as if they’re drinking in the sun and the green as though they’ve not seen them before.” She added, “There aren’t any ‘Keep Off the Grass’ signs, and one day I went out there and found a group of women sitting underneath a tree with their crocheting, and they were just sitting quietly—three of them under the tree. Their children were playing Ring-Around-the-Rosy and other games out on the grass and. . . I was really glad to see it.” “We’re always tweaking things to decide what people will enjoy and how best to serve families.”



Karen Ashton was raised and educated in Salt Lake City, Utah. She met her husband, Alan Ashton, while they attended University of Utah where he completed his Ph.D. degree. Karen is the mother of 11 children and the Ashtons are proud grandparents.

Mrs. Ashton was recently appointed a Utah Valley State College Board Trustee. She has served the Primary Children’s Medical Board, Primary General Board for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Shakespearean Festival Board of Governors, BYU Museum of

Art, and “Friends of the Orem Public Library.” Mr. and Mrs. Ashton were awarded the *Utahns of the Year Award* from the Marriott School of Business and Mrs. Ashton received the Senator Arthur B. Watkins Award for Outstanding Contributions to Cultural Arts.

The Ashtons founded Thanksgiving Point, in Lehi, Utah, as an expression of gratitude for all they received during the years they worked with WordPerfect Corp, a company Mr. Ashton co-founded.

Thanksgiving Point: Diversified Business Structure

With Thanksgiving Point's core operation completed in 1998, the Ashtons split their venture into two separate entities, the largest of which is a nonprofit educational institution called Thanksgiving Point Institute. The other entity is Thanksgiving Point Development Co. (Pritchett, 2003).

The gardens, Village shops, restaurant and deli, animal park, dinosaur museum, fairgrounds, and entertainment barn are controlled by the Ashtons through Thanksgiving Point Institute. The golf course, stadium theater, and office buildings are subleased through the development company (2003, Pritchett). "Through partnership agreements, Ashtons maintain control of all the buildings and grounds but do not have day-to-day operational responsibility," (Deseret News, 2002).

Subleasing property has helped make Thanksgiving Point the fifth most popular tourist attraction in the state (2002, Haddock). However, with new development opportunities have also come challenges. Visitors are coming from all over the world, demanding "normal business practices," (The Salt Lake Tribune, 2003). Nevertheless, attractions controlled by the Ashtons maintain their original family-oriented atmosphere. Thanksgiving Point continues to expand as it "moves toward becoming a full-scale resort," (The Salt Lake Tribune, 2003).

Timpanogos Storytelling Festival

Along with gardens, Karen Ashton has a passion for storytelling. "Fourteen years ago the director of the Orem Public Library asked me if I would work on the board of directors for the library. We were looking for events to help raise money (\$4.5 million) to build the children's library, and we had done all of the classic events On an airplane on the way back from Washington, D. C., I picked up a magazine. . . and it was talking about the national storytelling festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee I just knew suddenly that we could do that here." She attended the festival and was "blown away" by the number of people there and the diversity of the stories. There were stories from Africa and Norway, folk tales, true-life tales, personal history tales, and historical pieces.

The first Timpanogos Storytelling Festival was held under tents in a small park by Ashton's home, in their backyard, and in the neighbor's pasture. After the tents blew over twice on the night

before the festival opened, they borrowed large tents that are used for auto shows. Ashton fondly remembers, "All our volunteers were putting up chairs at midnight that night, with the lights from the cars showing out in the field." During the two-day festival, approximately 2,000 people attended. She was able to get James Christensen to design the poster, "so actually the first year we made more from selling James's work than we made on tickets." Last year (the thirteenth for the festival), 19,000 people attended—about 5,000 of whom were school-age children.

The Storytelling Festival has grown to become the second-largest storytelling festival in the United States. Most tellers have to be scheduled two years in advance, and the best tellers are hard to get. Ashton reports, however, that "This year we received a letter from him [a particularly outstanding storyteller] requesting to come."

Ashton adds, "We also just recently collaborated with Brigham Young University on a PBS special on family stories—telling your own family stories to your children. The special was shown September, 2002.

The festival is held the last weekend of August every year. This year, daytime activities are held at The Olmstead, the Scottish Power property at the mouth of Provo Canyon; and nightly activities are held at the SCERA Shell in Orem. On Thursdays at Sundance, workshops are held and ghost stories told at the outdoor theater.

Leadership Style and Business Philosophy

What type of leader can successfully organize and manage such large and diverse undertakings? When asked to explain her leadership style and describe her business philosophy, Ashton offered the following insights:

1. **Success.** "Success is in the family instead of in place of it . . . and as long as you're grounded there, you can go in amazingly new directions and may win at this game we call success. Or you may lose. But you're okay if you're grounded still on the things which are most important."
2. **Vision and Expertise.** "I think the secret always is finding people who have expertise in an area and letting them do what they do best without a lot of interference on your

part. For me it's mostly keeping the vision clear—you know, not letting them stray from that." For example, the Ashtons hired Johnny Miller to design the largest golf course in the state (The Salt Lake Tribune, 2001), now ranked among the top 150 good-service facilities in North America, (Salt Lake Tribune, 2003).

3. **Bravery.** "You can see things on a grand scale; but to know how to pull people together and bring it into being, you have to have quite a bit of imagination and you also have to have a lot of faith . . . Be a brave person . . . I have learned that it's really easy to be successful openly, but you have to learn to fail openly, as well as feel confident about yourself and your own abilities."
4. **Quiet Times.** "We assume there are other things that need to happen in our lives that are more important than taking a moment to sit down and think, but that might be the most productive thing we do all day long."
5. **Business Ethics.** When you can't count on somebody's honesty and integrity then you never really can count on what's going on . . . You don't divorce yourself personally from anything you do in business. You take your name and your personality and your reputation with you, and you live with it everyday.
6. **Good Life.** The secret to living the good life is taking a 30-minute nap every day.
7. **Responsibility.** "I certainly learned that money doesn't solve everything . . . People who think that when they have money they will stop worrying about it just have no concept—because then, if you're smart enough, you worry about where it can be used correctly."

Future Projects

The future appears promising for Karen Ashton, as she looks to share her talents and expertise in new areas. In June, Utah Governor Leavitt named Ashton to the Board of Trustees at Utah Valley State College, (Deseret Morning News, 2003). In addition Ashton says, "I would like to put in the most incredible children's museum you would find

anywhere. That's really what I would like to do next . . . kind of like a child-friendly Smithsonian."

Can others make a difference in the community as Karen Ashton has? The answer is not found in the money one spends but in the character traits that a person develops and shares:

- Dream big and take a leap of faith to get started.
- Develop and fine-tune business acumen as you maintain core values.
- Look beyond personal satisfaction to enriching others' lives.
- Maintain balance between expectations and reality.
- Be flexible and willing to change course directions.
- Don't be afraid to fail; be confident in yourself and your abilities.

*Judy Conder is a Professor in the Business Management Department and Diane B. Hartman is an Assistant Professor in the Business Systems Administration and Education Department at Utah Valley State College.

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