

Austin American-Statesman

Jennifer Stevens: The making of an ‘un-lobbyist’

Austinite with public relations firm helmed Mack, Jack & McConaughey.

Saturday, Oct. 4, 2014

By Michael Barnes



Jennifer Stevens, who organized the giant Matt, Jack & McConaughey benefit, here with Mack Brown.

During the summer of 2012, the dreamers behind the giant Mack, Jack & McConaughey benefit were looking for an event planner to skipper their first golf-gala-and-concert outing. Steve Hicks, chairman of CapStar Partners and University of Texas System regent, suggested that they talk to Jennifer Stevens.

The fair-haired Austinite with the mighty smile was not, however, by profession an event planner.

“Event planners spend money,” Stevens, 40, told them. “Fundraisers raise money. That’s what I am. If your goal is to raise money — and also have a good event — hire a fundraiser.”

The backers liked what they heard. They picked Austinite Stevens for the gargantuan job.

“I was like the dog who caught the car,” Stevens laughs. “I talked myself into a job.”

Thus far, the founder of the public affairs firm JHL Company — who has taken leadership positions with the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, Seton Healthcare Family and the Austin Chamber of Commerce — has helped Mack and Sally Brown, Jack and Amy Ingram and Matthew McConaughey and Camila Alves raise more than \$2 million for select children’s charities. The MJ&M event returns April 16-17.

Along the way, Stevens, who has run major Texas political campaigns and calls herself an “un-lobbyist,” has attracted a growing number of high-profile admirers.

“She has an amazing ability to pull different type people together for a common cause,” former Longhorns coach Brown says. “She can relate to anyone. She also has the ability to then make the best decision available and move forward with what is best for all.”



Jennifer Stevens, the ‘un-lobbyist,’ in the Capitol Extension.

‘A can-do spirit’

“I think Jennifer’s family — especially her parents — gave her the foundation to be a great leader,” says Bob Wingo, CEO of Sanders\Wingo Advertising and a Stevens mentor. “Jennifer seamlessly manages extremely complicated multiple projects that involve many moving parts. I love her velvet-hammer approach to handling these projects, no matter how difficult the task may be.”

Stevens was born in Denton to two high achievers. Jim Horn, a retired salesman, was the first Republican elected in Denton County. He served 18 years as a state representative. Mary Roberts Horn, currently Denton County judge, ran a small business out of the house that employed Stevens and her brother, James Horn, now a major in the U.S. Army.

“From the earliest age, I was campaigning, going door to door,” Stevens recalls. “People would slam the door when they heard we were Republicans, kind of like Austin today.”

She studied political science and English at the University of Texas.

“I graduated early so I could catch the political cycle,” she says. “I was that nerdy and into it.”

In 1994, when George W. Bush ran for governor, Stevens volunteered and then worked her way into an internship. She admired the way that Gov. Bush competed hard with Democrats but then worked closely with Democratic leaders in the Legislature.



Jennifer Stevens backstage at Mack, Jack & McConaughey with country star Jack Ingram.

“Competition is generally a good thing,” she says. “Bush knew he had to work with them to be effective. It was a great time in Texas politics.”

Her next gig was to handle state Sen. Troy Fraser’s campaign budget and scheduling as well as part of his grassroots and media operations.

“Holy cow, I think I put 70,000 miles on my car,” she says. “I lived in it. The district is as big as Mississippi.”

She next ran the Republican primary runoff for John Cornyn, when he first ran for Texas attorney general. After Cornyn won, she heard that U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm was going to retire.

“My heart stopped,” she says. “I knew Cornyn would go for it, and he did.”

Yet his announcement was postponed because of 9/11. The 26-year-old had to find a way to make payroll for his campaign against that backdrop.

“It was crazy, crazy,” she says. “We put together \$181,000, raised \$1,000 at a time. We made payroll.”

After working on the senator's transition team, she concluded that the federal government was not her cup of tea. She took a job instead in Gov. Rick Perry's administration, getting her feet wet in state policy. One of her most fulfilling jobs was to organize the official state visit from President Vicente Fox of Mexico and half his Cabinet.

"I was in heaven," she says. "It was right up my alley — super intense. I've always had a can-do spirit."

On her own

"Jennifer listens before she speaks," says Mike Rollins, president of the Austin Chamber of Commerce. "I think this attribute serves people well because they actually are hearing what others say, which is an essential part of being a good communicator."

In 2004, Stevens founded the JHL Company, a consulting firm that specializes in public and community affairs, mixing ties to business, politics and philanthropy.

"We are the message behind what you are trying to achieve," she likes to say. "Who do you need to know? What do they need to know about you? And how are you going to make and keep that connection? You used to walk the halls of the Lege. Now you've got to get into the community. You've got to do social media."

JHL can support a lobbying team with strategic communications.

"Associations and lobbyists generally take an old-school mindset," she says. "You have young legislators ... now they are there on the iPad. They are making decisions on public policy based on what they are reading there. If you are not there, you are nowhere." Hicks especially appreciates Stevens' vast business and social network.

"She gets to the bottom line very quickly, builds a consensus and then moves on," Hicks says. "She surrounds herself with an amazing staff that works endless hours and loves the projects that they are involved with. She is brilliant in understanding who the people are that will have an emotional 'buy-in' to a project."

Stevens gets up at 5 a.m. every morning to run with the same group of women she has run with for eight years. Her days are booked in 15- to 30-minute segments. She supervises a dozen employees between JHL and Rocca, a printing and promotional product company she founded because the one she used kept getting orders wrong.

"I had asked for a meeting with the owner. While we were talking, he told me that I would never succeed because I didn't have 'any testosterone' in my office," Stevens says (at the time, she employed all women). "I thanked him for his insights and started a competing business."



Jennifer Stevens with her husband, Don Stevens, and their children, Morgan Stevens, Elle Lustina and Mikie Lustina.

Married to lobbyist Don Stevens, her second husband, she cheers their kids' games and follows their ups and downs closely.

"I am very hands-on and engaged with all of them," she says. "I'm busy, but I don't take work just to take it. I'll go: 'That's a great idea. A beast of an idea. Who in the world is going to do it? We should do it.'"

Helping those who help others

Stevens recently took over as board chairwoman for the local Komen cancer-fighting chapter. She's also the chairwoman of Austin Gives for the Chamber of Commerce, and she's on the Seton Fifty board. Komen is a special project.

"Like everyone, I hate cancer," she says. "I have buried family members and friends. Cancer is prevalent in my family. But giving back is not about you, it's about helping those who can't help themselves. One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. That's too many."

When the chance to run MJ&M, one of the city's biggest social-giving events, came along, she snapped to the call.

"I love a big idea that sounds impossible, then jumping in and leading and making it happen," she says. "I kept saying: 'Trust me, this will work.' People would say: 'How do you know?' I didn't, I guess. But I trust my instincts, and in business, that's what you have to do. Small business is like walking a tightrope — don't look down and keep moving."

It helped that Stevens' team understood the sensitivities of the prominent people and strong personalities involved.

"Jennifer manages large projects by staying focused on the endgame but knowing she can only accomplish one thing at a time," says Texas Workforce Commissioner Hope Andrade. "She understands how to prioritize to reach success and knows when to move forward and, equally important, to be flexible and change course."

So maybe a former political fundraiser can make a good event planner.

"We know how to keep it unique to Austin but appeal beyond, too," she says. "All the political training in my life has been put to the test for the past two years. But good people coming together to make a major impact on our community — it's all been worth it."