

11/29/2006 10:55:00 AM

Passion spurs partners

By **BRANDY EMILY**

With just a glimpse of the quilt fabric, it's obvious whether a purse, handbag or duffle bag is a Vera Bradley.

With distinct patterns of colors to coordinate all seasons, Vera Bradley bags and accessories have come a long way from their beginnings in Fort Wayne when two women started the company with 10 prototype items, \$500 and passion for their product.

"It's our American dream; it may not be your American dream," said Patricia Miller, co-founder of Vera Bradley to a group at this year's final Leadership Jackson County Distinguished Speaker Series on Tuesday afternoon. "It was our passion and our dream."

The Vera Bradley brand is now sold in 3,400 stores across the United States.

Miller said passion is what kept her and her business partner, Barbara Bradley Baekgaard, going when they were tired and ready to give up. "Entrepreneurs have the passion," Miller said.

A self-proclaimed "dabbler" in many industries, Miller said she is "the master of none and dabbler of many things."

Putting up wallpaper and staging their own home clothing shows before starting Vera Bradley, Miller said she and Baekgaard are good partners because they are so different. She said Baekgaard is the designer of the products while she handles the business side of things.

Keeping up with the dabbling, the company started the Vera Bradley Foundation for Breast Cancer in 1998. Since then, the foundation has raised more than \$4 million for the IU School of Medicine and has pledged another \$6.8 million to be completed in 2014.

Showing a video of both her and Baekgaard for the Vera Bradley Foundation for Breast Cancer, Baekgaard said she hopes the company can someday find a new cause because breast cancer would no longer be a problem.

Miller has also followed her own passions by a leave of absence in 2005 from Vera Bradley to become the first secretary of commerce for Indiana under Gov. Mitch Daniels' administration.

Miller said she was away from Vera Bradley for 20 months to take on this role with Daniels' campaign and then state government.

"I did it with the blessing of my business partner and my marriage partner," Miller said of Baekgaard and her husband of more than 40 years.

Describing herself as a mother, wife, grandmother and businesswoman, but maybe not all at the same time, Miller said she is a former high school and middle school teacher who appreciates the idea of the YOJACK program that benefits from the speaker series.

"How do you learn to be a leader? Practice, practice, practice," Miller said to the crowd.



Helen Horton of Seymour, left, carrying her Vera Bradley purse, talks to Pat Miller, co-founder of Vera Bradley, who spoke to a group during the Leadership Jackson County Distinguished Speaker Series Tuesday at the Jackson County Education Center. Miller took a leave of absence from Vera Bradley in 2005 to become the first secretary of commerce for Indiana under Gov. Mitch Daniels. (Tribune photo by Brandy Emily)

Miller file

- Patricia Miller is a co-founder of Vera Bradley.
- She and business partner Barbara Bradley Baekgaard started the business in Fort Wayne in 1998.
- Their earlier ventures included wallpaper-hanging business and showing clothes in homes.
- Miller served as Indiana's secretary of commerce under Gov. Mitch Daniels.



Jackson County residents including Marvina Lewis, right, lined up to talk with Pat Miller, co-founder of Vera Bradley after her speech Tuesday at the Leadership Jackson County Distinguished Speaker Series. Miller shared the story of how Vera Bradley was started in Fort Wayne in 1982 on a \$500 investment, a classified advertisement and a passion to succeed with a quality product.
(Tribune photo by Brandy Emily)