

**Celebrating Women's History Month
The Business of Banking**

2019

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Host: Podcasting from Orlando, Florida, this is the Lowndes Client Corner, where we highlight and celebrate our law firm clients and their many achievements. Who are we featuring today?

Laura Walda: Today we're continuing our celebration of Women's History Month by interviewing Jennifer Pollock, Vice-President of Commercial Financing at Valley National Bank. Valley National Bank is one of the most trusted and respected banks in the industry and has over \$30 billion in assets and over 230 locations throughout New York, New Jersey, Florida and Alabama. I'm your host today, Laura Walda. Let's find out more about our guest Jennifer Pollock. Hi Jennifer. I'm really thankful you were able to join us for our podcast today.

Jennifer Pollock: Laura, it's a pleasure. Thank you for asking.

Laura Walda: Absolutely. Well, Jennifer, I wanted to ask you about your business. What do you do as the Vice-President of Commercial Financing at Valley National Bank?

Jennifer Pollock: Well, every day is different for me. Most days I am talking with business owners, real estate investors, those types of folks, and really just trying to work through being a liaison for financing for them and their needs. I cover five branches here in Central Florida and work with our internal folks as well as our referral sources in the community. So I love my job almost every day.

Laura Walda: Fantastic. Well, could you tell me a little bit about Valley National Bank? How is it different from other banks?

Jennifer Pollock: Well, Valley National Bank has been a longstanding bank in New Jersey. It was incorporated in Wayne, New Jersey, and it started out really as a residential bank, a consumer bank if you will. And the CEO traveled down here to Aventura, Florida I think the first time, and he saw obviously the gorgeous weather in Florida. Saw that Florida was a business friendly state, no state taxes, and really felt the strong business community in Florida. And that was his path to future growth for the bank.

So Valley came down to Florida in 2014 I think. Bought its first small bank and has been buying banks in the one to \$8 billion range for the past four to five years since then, to grow its position in Florida. The last acquisition we bought this past year actually got us into Alabama as well. So looking forward to having Valley National Bank be as large in the south as it is in the north ultimately.

Laura Walda: Fantastic. Well, I'd love to hear more about you and where you grew up. I understand you didn't go directly into banking. Can you tell us about how you ended up serving in the military and that impact on your life?

Jennifer Pollock: Oh, I'm probably the most reluctant banker you will ever meet. And I say that in the best possible way. I grew up in a small town, New Bern, North Carolina. It is on the east coast, about an hour in from the coastline. And my father was a Marine. That's what got us down there. And my mum worked in accounting all of her life. In my sophomore year in high school we had career day, and I remember it clearly. In my chemistry class in comes a soldier in full camouflage fatigues, combat boots, very impressive. And he said – behind the

chemistry lab desk he said, "You can be anything you want to be." He said, "You can go anywhere you want to go in the Army."

And I was done. So when I turned 17, I signed up. I couldn't even enter until I turned 18, but when I was 17 I signed up at the recruiter's office. And I'll tell you, the recruiter said, "You'll do basic training on the coast, on the beach in Fort Jackson, South Carolina." And he said, "You'll travel the world." And he did a really good recruiter's job, but I did. I went to basic training November 19 – gosh, '88.

Laura Walda: I love that you remember the exact date. That must have been a pretty profound experience to go into basic training then.

Jennifer Pollock: {Laughs} Yes, six weeks of basic training. You know, but when you're young and fearless, you don't know what you don't know, and you don't know what to be afraid of. So yes, it was a great experience for me. Really from that day, all the way through the eight years that I stayed in the military, I traveled throughout the United States. I traveled throughout Europe and really got to see and experience things that I think are crucial for a young mind these days.

Laura Walda: It's a pretty powerful message to have somebody tell you, you can be whatever you want to be, that's for sure. It's something that really sounds pretty inspiring. Did you learn different languages?

Jennifer Pollock: I did. So it's interesting, and you never know what mechanics are working behind you when you're that young. I'll tell you that what I told my mom that I want to go into the Army. I have no idea what she felt because at that age you're only thinking about yourself. And I know this because I have a 20-year-old now, and I think, my goodness gracious, does she even know I'm alive anymore? But she does.

But anyhow, when we were down in the recruiting office, I could have very well been signed up as a potato peeler or a mailroom clerk or any number of jobs that the military will automatically assign you. And what I didn't know then that I do know now is my mom said, "No. If you're going to have her, you're going to use her." And I was able to take a multitude of different intelligence tests that I may not have actually done at that time. And I qualified for language training, and back in the late '80s, early '90s, Russia was the language of choice for the military.

Today it's Farsi and Arabic and things like that. But back in the '80s, late '80s, early '90s it was Russian. And so I did. I spent almost two years at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. Not a bad place to be when you're 18.

Laura Walda: Not when you're 18, like, at any age.

Jennifer Pollock: If I knew then what I know now, right? But then I deployed directly to Germany, and I was in this little mountain town called Wildflecken. And it was right on the east/west German border, and stayed there and was tactical, you know, slept 280 days out of the year in the woods in all kinds of weather. And really just listened to Russian communications for the better part of, gosh, up until the wall came down. How about that?

Laura Walda: Well, that's unbelievable. So how in the world did you get into banking from there, and how have you chosen that as your career Jennifer?

Jennifer Pollock: Well, I'll tell you, one of the major reasons for going into the military, other than the opportunity to travel, the opportunity to get out of a very, very small town, really was money for college. And so I got the GI Bill. And when I got

out, I went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Got my bachelor's degree and like most colleges do, you have career fairs your senior year there. And strangely enough, a gentleman, a nice, kind, grandfatherly like gentleman said, "You're really good talking to people. And that's what we need for our next generation of bankers. We don't need necessarily finance. We don't need bean counters," I think is what he called them back then. "We just need people who can relate and communicate with other people out there." And I thought, well, that's easy enough. And honestly, that started my career in banking. He offered me a job, and I didn't take his job. My first banking job I got out of a newspaper ad for SunTrust Bank. Who has newspaper ads anymore these days?

Laura Walda: Right, right.

Jennifer Pollock: I've enjoyed my banking career over the past 20 years. I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know people and business owners. The people that I talk to on a daily basis, they're the ones out there making things happen. I mean, they are the economic drivers, right. If you think about it, as a banker, my value to them is really being the liaison access to capital that they need and being able to tell their story to folks who don't know them or who haven't met them.

And so that's valuable to me. I think that's valuable to business owners, to real estate investors and those people who want access, direct access to capital. That's where I find my value.

Laura Walda: Well, Jennifer, I know that for you working with and empowering other women is a very important part of your career. What kind of things do you do individually to advance women? And what kind of initiatives does Valley National Bank have to empower women?

Jennifer Pollock: Well, Valley National Bank has a Women in Business program, and we actually adopted that through our last acquisition of US AmeriBank. They had an ongoing Women in Business program. And it's a valuable asset for us I think because it showcases that diversity does matter to the bank, and that's meaningful to me. In my daily work, the banking industry has historically, like many industries, been primarily male and primarily male at the higher C suite and executive level.

And I just think throughout my career, and really having started in the military where obviously it was male dominated, the military did not treat men and women differently the way that the civilian world does, I have found. And so having learned that discipline early, before I even had a career, just set my mind to, well we are all equal, and why aren't we treating each other equally in pay, in race, in sex, in gender? Those kinds of things. And so it just has always made sense to me when I see an inequity, to try to step in and alleviate that. And that's why I'm so passionate about helping other women really, because if I don't, who will?

Laura Walda: Absolutely. Well, I've certainly been the beneficiary of that Jennifer. I've really enjoyed working with you. Do you have any advice for young women entering the workforce?

Jennifer Pollock: I actually have a daughter that is about to enter the workforce. So this is on my mind constantly. So I would say continually, continually read and educate yourself and just continue the learning process throughout each stage in your career. You never know where you're going to end up. And definitely where you start, it's doubtful that it's where you're going to end up.

So I think self-awareness in this next generation is important. I think that they are ahead of our generation because they don't see race and sex and

discrimination the same. It's not there as much for them. But the other thing that I would say to these women is really just to create a 360 degree environment of mentors and friends. People that you can rely on and bounce things off of, throughout your career.

Laura Walda: Well, wonderful. Well, thank you so much Jennifer for your time today and telling us about your career path and what you're doing to empower women professionally. I truly enjoy working with you and have loved our conversation, and we just appreciate all you do.

Jennifer Pollock: Well, it's been such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Host: Thank you for listening to this episode of the Lowndes Client Corner. Be sure to join us next time for another Lowndes Client Corner interview. Learn more at Lowndesclientcorner.com. Lowndes is a multi-service law firm, advising public and private businesses across multiple industries. Proud to serve Central Florida and beyond for 50 years. Learn more at Lowndes-law.com.

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