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BUSINESS

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Q&A | Colleen Barrett

Her career has soared with airline

The Tony Jannus Award winner has grown with Southwest Airlines.

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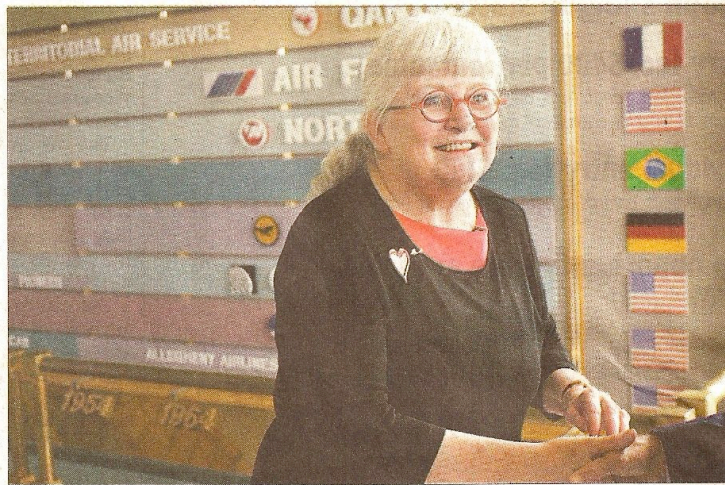
Forty years ago, a young Air Force wife from New England went looking for work as a legal secretary in her new hometown of San Antonio, Texas. Colleen Barrett went into the lobby of each office building over six stories tall and checked the directory for law firms.

She was hired by Herb Kelleher, a sharp lawyer who latched onto the idea of starting a no-frills, low-cost airline flying between San Antonio, Dallas and Houston. Southwest Airlines was born in 1971.

Co-founder Kelleher took over as chairman seven years later, with Barrett as his assistant.

Today, Southwest still has cheap fares, a fun-loving corporate culture and quirks like first-come, first-served seating. The airline also flies more passengers than any other U.S. carrier.

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Colleen Barrett, Southwest Airlines' president, greets the media Thursday at the St. Petersburg History Museum. She received the Tony Jannus Award.

Customer service is top duty

As president, Barrett is the highest-ranking woman in the airline industry.

Barrett, 63, was in the Tampa Bay area Thursday to receive the annual Tony Jannus Award for achievement in commercial aviation.

She talked to the *Times* about Southwest's "dress code" controversy, a new boarding drill and what makes the airline so successful.

There's been a lot of press about employees telling passengers their clothing was inappropriate to fly Southwest, and the airline apologized to two of them, Kyla Ebbert of San Diego and Largo resident Joe Winiecki. Have employees complained that Southwest doesn't back them up anymore?

I got some pretty passionate employee communications as a result of those apologies. We had to put a stop to the utter, ridiculous exposure — pun intended — to what was going on.

I did not apologize ever for the way our employees handled the Kyla situation. Our employee handled it just fine (telling her to cover up with a blanket).

You would have thought all this happened the day before she showed up on every talk show in America when it (actu-

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Colleen Barrett,
Southwest Airlines president

ally) happened three months before. She got her apology; it wasn't the apology she wanted. The second situation ... I think we did owe the guy an apology. I don't think we handled that very well.

Wouldn't it be easier for Southwest to spell out what kinds of attire are not allowed on board?

(Some) employees said, "Okay, give me a list." I said no, because to define something means you limit it.

You can't write a scenario for everything that happens in this life. You've got to use some common sense and good judgment.

Southwest is about to tweak how passengers board planes, with people assigned numbers to line up within the three boarding groups (A, B and C). Why not do away with open seating and give travelers reserved seats?

Everybody, for years, said that they wanted assigned seating. That was the No. 1 complaint we got in 35 years. But when you really started talking to people ... they just wanted the comfort of knowing they had a seat. And they hated standing in line. So, what we've done is give them assigned boarding positions. And so now they don't have to stand and wait and wait and wait.

At age 36, Southwest is hardly a start-up carrier. How has Southwest been consistently profitable and so popular with customers?

We've grown and we've matured and we've had to make tough business decisions. We've had Wall Street tell us we're growing too fast and then we're growing too slow.

But if you really study the whole history, you'll see that we've been very intentional about our growth. We've always had a few goals, making sure that we were properly leveraged, making sure our balance sheet was strong.

If you go to the customer service, I think one of our best traits is we've always underpromised and overdelivered. And I think one of the reasons that the general public accepts us is because we have never purported to be all things to all people. We know who we are.

Your duties as president are pretty unusual, overseeing Southwest's customer service and culture of teamwork. How does it work?

The customer service culture and the love is truly, absolutely part of our brand. Our mission is basically — I know it sounds a little Pollyanna-ish — to practice the Golden Rule every day and just do our very best.

You could walk up to almost anybody at Southwest Airlines and ask them that. If they've been there at least a year, they could tell you what their mission is. Most companies can't do that.

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