

# BUSINESS

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2007 ♦ THE TAMPA TRIBUNE ♦ TBO.com



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Colleen Barrett has worked for Southwest Airlines for more than 35 years. She will step down as president next year, but she isn't leaving. "I will continue my passion to pursue customer service," she says.

## Southwest's Focus Hasn't Wavered

President Colleen Barrett, recipient of the 2007 Tony Jannus Award, says the airline is a customer service company first.

By TED JACKOVICS  
The Tampa Tribune

**S**T. PETERSBURG — All Colleen Barrett wanted when she sought a job in Texas four decades ago was to become the best legal secretary she could be.

Instead, she became the best airline president of her time.

Proven fact? Simply check the bottom line of Southwest Airlines, where Barrett has worked for more than 35 years and has been president since 2001. Unlike every other major U.S. carrier, Southwest, the largest airline at Tampa International Airport, has remained profitable since the recession and terrorist attacks earlier

this decade.

Still, Barrett ranks financial performance third among her priorities, insisting that Southwest's primary task is to treat employees well, which leads to customer satisfaction and ultimately to financial success.

Barrett visited the Tampa Bay area on Thursday to receive the 2007 Tony Jannus Award for her contributions to the aviation industry. Southwest chairman and co-founder Herb Kelleher, the 1993 Jannus Award winner who first hired Barrett as a legal secretary in San Antonio, joined her for Thursday's festivities, when Barrett took time with reporters to mix some laughs with serious talk about the airline industry.



Barrett was searching for a job in Texas, when she met Southwest co-founder Herb Kelleher.

**Q** What was your strategy to get that Texas job as a legal secretary?

**A** I visited buildings that were six stories or taller hoping to find a good lawyer to work for. Then it took Herb four interviews to hire me.

**Q** It's hard to believe Southwest has been flying for more than three decades, in part because of the energetic culture you have nurtured. How do you perceive the evolution of the airline over the years?

**A** I view Southwest as an adolescent who doesn't ever want to grow up. But we have grown and matured.

**Q** How do others perceive Southwest?

See **SOUTHWEST PRESIDENT**, Page 2 ▶

*Change is coming to boarding procedure.*

## SOUTHWEST PRESIDENT

Continued From Page 1

**A** Sometimes Wall Street says we are growing too fast. Sometimes they say we are growing too slow. Sometimes we are too liberal. Sometimes we are too conservative.

**Q** What matters?

**A** We have never promised to be all things to all people. That gets you in trouble.

**Q** What remains the same over the years?

**A** We have never changed our original mission: That we wanted to provide the best customer service. It just so happens that we are an airline providing service. That's the same today.

**Q** How about Southwest's structure and operations?

**A** We started as a short-haul carrier, point to point, not hub and spoke. We still do point to point, not hub and spoke. We wanted to be a high frequency carrier. We still are. We don't think of going into a new city where we can't start with eight to 10 round trips a day.

**Q** So what's new?

**A** We will inaugurate a new boarding process in November. We had

heard forever that people were unhappy that we did not assign seats. But when we studied it intensely, we found they just did not want to stand in line to board the plane. Our new system will assign their places in line, and they can still choose their seats.

**Q** You plan to step aside as president next year, but have said you would continue working for Southwest maybe for another five years? What would you do?

**A** It is time for the next generation to lead, for [chief executive] Gary Kelly to pick his team. I will continue my passion to pursue customer service and Southwest's culture. All those things people asked me to do and I might have been too busy and had to say "no," I will be able to say "yes."

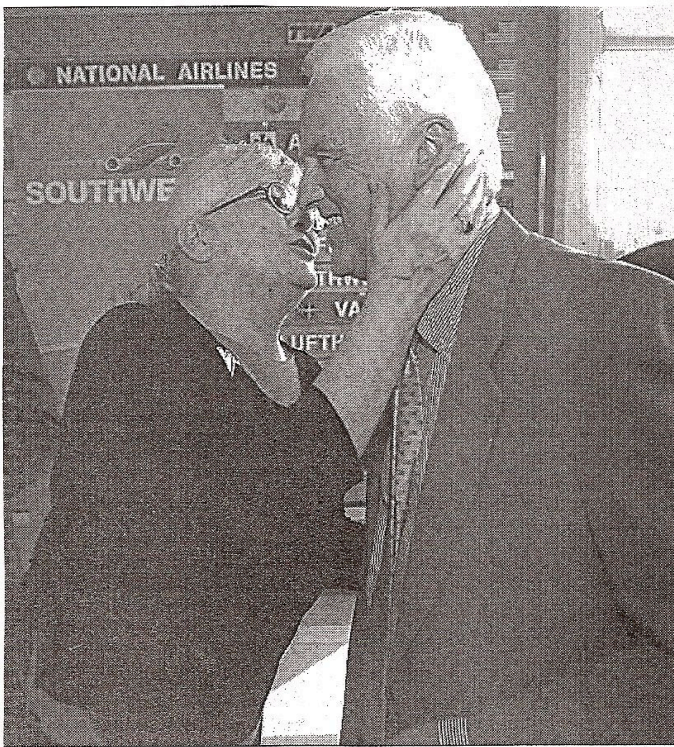
**Q** You and Herb Kelleher have been the face of the airline the public knows well. Will Southwest always have a leader who is out front in representing the legacy that's gotten you here?

**A** The employees would insist on it.

**Q** Southwest knows how to enjoy a celebration. Herb Kelleher is here, Gary Kelly is scheduled to arrive later. More than 100 Southwest employees are scheduled to be at the Tampa awards dinner. So who is running the airline today?

**A** Southwest is in good hands. We have lots of great people. Count on it.

Reporter Ted Jackovics can be reached at [tjackovics@tampatrib.com](mailto:tjackovics@tampatrib.com) or (813) 259-7817.



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John O'Connor, chairman and CEO of DMJM Aviation, was among the well-wishers Thursday when Colleen Barrett accepted the Tony Jannus Award.