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Julianne McCollum: A tree-loving, MBA-holding, Internet-savvy geeky-hippie with her marketing mojo on

By: Tony Brown, Staff Writer June 17, 2014

CHARLOTTE – Some good PR people don't like marketing themselves; they're all about their clients.

So it took about two months of cajoling, hounding, and email-stalking – everything short of blackmailing – before On the Level landed Julianne McCollum, whose Yellow Duck Marketing has in three years become *the* Charlotte marketing firm for real estate companies.

Here are just a handful of recent and current Yellow Duck projects:

The Crosland Southeast-Childress Klein mixed-use Waverly development in south Charlotte; the Marsh Properties-Aston Properties Sedgefield development; the Crosland-Allen Tate hotel in SouthPark; and the Charlotte Housing Authority-Laurel Street Residential mixed-income Renaissance project on the site of the old Boulevard Homes housing project.

Although she grew up in Silicon Valley, with a short stay in her father's native Britain, and went to college in Indiana, her computer-savvy reputation won McCollum attention in Charlotte.

At 37, McCollum has been a presence, a known quantity, on the Charlotte real estate scene for 17 years, ever since Faison — where she had previously interned — hired her fresh out of Purdue University.

Later, Todd Mansfield – then CEO of Crosland and now CEO at Crescent Communities – brought her on at Crosland, where she rose to become vice president for marketing and technology, and essentially gave birth to the company's web presence. "He heard I knew HTML," the original website-creation coding.

As for her go-getter mojo, she held jobs throughout college, mostly in retail marketing, and earned her 2004 MBA at Wake Forest University while working full-time.

Another of her clients is Tim McCollum, her husband and a developer whose Revolve Residential is doing a pocket-infill residential project in Charlotte's historic Cherry neighborhood.

Yellow Duck doesn't have to market itself. The self-deprecating McCollum's resume and reputation do that for her. Here's as much of the backstory as we could pry out of her at a recent interview in Yellow Duck's renovated industrial space offices in South End.

Marketing these days is so digitally driven. And you guys do that really well. You actually know HTML, right? Real computer coding. Oh, yeah. I'm old-school. That's how I got into it. I learned HTML as it was being first used, in the '90s.

When you were a kid, did you think, "Wow, I can't wait to grow up and use psychographic research to market things to people via the World Wide Web"? Ha. But yes, sort of. I've always been interested in trends. I used to pore through the almanac and the encyclopedia. That's the kind of geek I am. And I was into promotion, too. I was a cheerleader.

I bet you were the head cheerleader – the captain. Of course! What did you think? You're not going to put the cheerleader thing in the story, are you? That's not important.

Have to. These little "unimportant" things are telling. Well, I was class president, too.

How'd you get so clever about the Internet? I grew up in Silicon Valley. My father worked at IBM as a (computer) engineer and my mother worked in the computer sciences department at Stanford (University). She worked there for 30 years, from the 1970s until the 2000s.

Your mother essentially eye-witnessed the creation of the Internet. That's right. My parents were not entrepreneurial, but the start-up culture we lived in helps me to be fearless.



Julianne McCollum. Photo by Tony Brown

Fearlessness would certainly help when you jump off the cliff you did, starting your own business. It does! Especially in the environment of 2011 when the real estate market was still quite depressed. I had a goal of starting a business, and I was at that age, but it was a recession, so I waited a little bit. Fortunately, the recession turned out to be a perfect storm for starting this kind of business: Real estate-related companies started shedding their marketing departments to save overhead, but they found they still needed assistance, that they couldn't go without fractional help. So it was a perfect time.

Your business actually benefitted from the recession. Exactly.

And it's been going. . . ? Gangbusters. And we have done zero marketing for ourselves. We're a bad example. We're keeping up with growth instead of forcing growth, but that's been good, really. I was warned about growing too fast, and it was good advice.

You were pretty connected, too. That didn't hurt either, especially because of all the spin-offs from Crosland: Northwood Ravin, Crosland Southeast, Laurel Street Residential – and Crosland itself, of course.

What's it like when you're working for one company and then accept a gig from a rival company? We do take work from competitors. When we dive into an apartment community, we make sure we're not working with a developer on another one in the same submarket. We're transparent with clients about who we are working with. And I've gotten very good at saying "No."

Meaning? Just making sure that a new client makes sense from a (business)-culture standpoint, from a competitive perspective, too. And we can't do it all. We're kind of a streamlined staff. I don't want to do it all, either. We have four full-time Ducks.

Ha. Otherwise we work with freelance talent, specialists in different areas on a regular basis, more if projects are so large we need additional talent. We also have affiliate relationships with a number of other firms. Search-engine optimization undergoes changes daily, moves too fast for us to keep up with. We're just too busy to stay fully apprised, so we work with another firm on a contract basis. It's more cost-effective and became a trend when the economy tanked. A lot of bigger creative industries fractured into smaller ones with specialty areas. We still do a lot in-house, like social media: Facebook, Instagram, blogging, Vine Videos. We brought on a full-time digital person. And e-blasts. I forgot e-blasts.

From a reporter's standpoint, you're a great source because you you're on top of things. I see you at Charlotte City Council rezoning meetings working big projects about as often as I see Jeff Brown at Moore & Van Allen – and he's one of the highest-profile land-use attorneys in town.

You should know; you work with him often enough. We're the Jeff Brown of real estate marketing!

Ha. Exactly. That would be a great slogan, because it's true, and because everybody in the business would get the reference. It's been interesting to be on – I don't want to say "sidelines" – on the leading edge of where this business is going. The creative people, the marketing people, us, architects, the Jeff Browns – we hear about these things early. The developers come to us before these things happen. And there is definitely a resurgence.

You're next door to a Vespa dealer. Have you bought one yet? No, but I will. I just rode one for the first time while we were on vacation in Italy. What a blast! I just need a little one, like Audrey Hepburn.

Audrey Hepburn+Italy="Roman Holiday"! Exactly! I love watching old movies like that! My husband and I. . .when you start your own businesses like we have, you learn really fast to take "austerity measures." For us, that meant cutting out cable (television). But we kept the broadcast channels – and Internet, of course, and Netflix, and Apple TV – and we're going through the entire AFI (American Film Institute) 100 best movies of all time.

You also do some pro bono work, right. For nonprofits? Oh, yeah. Probably too much of it. Hey – I don't know if you knew this, but I was just named to the board of the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Yeah, I'm a big tree-loving hippie.

A hippie with an MBA who can build a website and start an out-of-the-gate successful small business? Yeah, I guess you'd say geeky-hippie. People have that stereotype about creative people, that we're all. . .you know.

Stereotypes are often at least partially founded in truth. As long as they don't think I'm flaky, I'm fine with whatever people think.

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