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Privitera: Legacy Builder

From designing her family home as a teen to showpiece creations at Baylor and Texas, Sherri Privitera is generating a new blueprint for project leadership

BY MICHAEL SMITH



Sherri Privitera shows daughter, Katania, her breakthrough project at Baylor in 2014.
COURTESY OF SHERRI PRIVITERA

At least once a week, Sherri Privitera walked onto the construction site at Baylor University's McLane Stadium, put her iPhone in the air and FaceTimed with her father back in Ashland, Mo., providing him with a virtual tour of Privitera's fledgling showpiece.

Privitera treasured those conversations with her ailing dad, Brent Arnold. She was on her way to becoming one of the preeminent architects in college athletics in 2014 when McLane Stadium opened and her father, a trucker, was a serial do-it-yourselfer.

But they talked the same language, those two. They always had, even when Privitera was growing up in Ashland. He fostered her creative side, while also instilling in her a sense that she could achieve anything, even in the heavily male-dominated sports architecture and design space.

When Privitera got to middle school, students had to choose one path or the other — home economics or industrial arts. Most of those decisions came down to gender, but not for young Sherri. She was accustomed to working with her dad on projects around the house, and she knew how to draw and work with her hands, so she jumped at the chance to enroll in industrial arts.

By eighth grade, Sherri's parents had acquired a larger piece of land in Ashland and decided to build on it. The specifics of the new home's size, floor plan and design became an ongoing topic around the dinner table.

Finally, one night, Sherri asked her parents if she could create the design for the house. They said yes. Once construction began, Sherri would sometimes skip school so she could stain the floors and trim while her parents worked.

"My dad was an incredible teacher, and he thought I was capable of drawing the plans," said Privitera, whose father passed away in 2016. "We still have the T-square and marble tablet that we used to draw the plans at the table."

The original drawings, however, were lost. But that was the first of many clear signs that Privitera was destined for a career in architecture and design.



In 17 years at Kansas City-based Populous, where she now is one of the highest-ranking women at the global architectural firm, Privitera has ascended to heights no other woman has in its North America business.

She's the first woman at Populous Americas to hold the title senior principal and also the first female board member for that division.

Privitera, who spent seven years at HNTB prior to Populous, just recently was named chair of the Americas Resource Council, a body of about 30 Populous experts within the firm who share best practices and thought leadership.

It's a distinct honor for her to chair that group, said Earl Santee, senior principal and member of the board and a giant in sports design for more than 30 years whose term as Populous Americas managing director ended in 2019.

"I'd say she is one of our most senior female leaders," Santee said. "You know, take the female out. She's one of our senior leaders. People here watch what she does, and they follow that same path. That's the kind of effect she has on people she works with."

Privitera, who has been involved with 80 projects touching 50 universities worth about \$8 billion, was known as a respected and talented architect who had the ear of her clients in the college space, but it was her work on designing McLane Stadium that really distinguished her in the field.

Santee and Privitera were technically partners on designing Baylor's \$266 million football stadium, but Santee said Privitera took the lead. She started out as project manager and effectively wound up as the client manager, too.

"I just let her go," Santee said. "She knew how to communicate to a very diverse group, and she gave direction to our designers and planners. Most of all, she just had a tremendous rapport with the clients. She's authentic, she's sincere and she has this ability to demonstrate to the team a real commitment to the project."



Privitera also has become a trusted adviser to collegiate athletic directors, who lean on her for projects as simple as creating new premium spaces or as enormous as designing Baylor's stadium or Texas' massive \$175 million south end zone renovation.

Despite the pandemic, which has put a number of projects on hold in both college and professional sports, Privitera's calendar remains slammed. In addition to finishing up at Texas, she has major projects in the works at

Missouri, Texas-San Antonio, Missouri-Kansas City, another one at Baylor and one at her alma mater, Nebraska.

Sherri Privitera

- **Company, title:** Populous. Senior architect, senior principal.
- **Other positions:** Chair, Americas Resource Council; member, Americas Regional Board
- **Joined Populous:** 2005
- **Resides:** Kansas City
- **Hometown:** Ashland, Mo.
- **Alma mater:** Nebraska, B.S. and master's in architecture
- **Honors:** 2016 SBJ Power Player; 2015 SBJ Game Changer

“She’s been a trailblazer in this business,” Texas Athletic Director Chris Del Conte said. “And when you’re a trailblazer, like her, you have to be perfect, especially for those [women] who will come after you. But most of all, she’s just a tremendous architect.”

Purdue’s former athletic director, the late Morgan Burke, was one of her first mentors in the college space. He helped her understand the nuances of

working with athletic departments as clients, what kind of conflicts she could expect and the importance of understanding the culture of a university.

“Purdue is very pragmatic; it’s not about the bells and whistles for us,” said Nancy Cross, Purdue’s longtime senior associate AD who worked alongside Burke for two decades. “It’s an engineering thing, and she always understood that.”

Whenever she worked with Purdue on a project, “it was never about making it so big or to accommodate a certain number of people,” Cross said. “It was more about what we were trying to accomplish for the student athletes, the fans, the donors.”

In fact, the first time Privitera pitched for a project was at Purdue.

“I was scared to death,” she said. “I remember Morgan called me ‘Kid’ for the first time, and from then on, I was ‘Kid.’”



Long before she thought about breaking through any glass ceilings in sports design, Privitera graduated from Nebraska with bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture.

She had just completed her thesis in 1995, in which she designed an NBA arena. It was the most fun she'd had studying architecture and cemented in her mind that she wanted to go into sports design.

Privitera recalls a classmate asking her what she wanted to do after graduation.

"I want to run Populous someday," Privitera said she answered. "This was the '90s, before the whole worldwide web ... so much has changed since then. But that's honestly what I wanted to do, work at Populous."

Privitera's father had helped her believe that she could accomplish anything, so the idea of being a woman in a male-dominated industry didn't register as an impediment.

From what she recalls, her architecture classes at Nebraska were pretty evenly split between men and women. But something happened between graduation and the workplace.

Once she moved into the field, especially in sports, she rarely saw other women in the same line of work.

"When you have jobs that require long hours, they're not family-friendly, there's a lot of travel, they're just not conducive. That's the theory," said Patti Phillips, CEO of Women Leaders in College Sports.

Work-life challenges never stopped Privitera from taking on leadership roles, either inside Populous or within the college athletics space.

Brooke Craig, a senior associate architect at Populous, has worked on several projects with Privitera and calls her an inspiration.

"Sherri is a motivating example for fellow female architects like myself," Craig said. "To reach a position of senior leadership in two male-dominated fields [architecture and sports] is challenging, but Sherri has shown us there is a path.

“She’s demonstrated that, as you pave your own way, it’s just as important to bring others with you. She did just that for me. My career would not be on the trajectory it is without her.”

Last spring when sports were paused, Privitera and others at Populous compared notes and realized that they were having many of the same conversations with college administrators about a variety of issues, ranging from the return to competition to spacing challenges in the training room and what future game days might look like.

Rather than managing the issues one call at a time, one school at a time, Privitera and her team created a weekly confidential call that became known as the “Collegiate Think Tank.”

It started small with about 10 people, Privitera said, and in a few weeks they had more than 100 people on the call representing 30 universities, sharing best practices and asking questions of Populous experts, who could share what they were learning from professional teams and leagues as well.

Phillips, who also lives in Kansas City, befriended Privitera a decade ago. She was taken by how Privitera asserted herself to go from being a designer to more of a trusted adviser to athletic directors.

Privitera grew up in the business with mentors who were all men, because they were the people who were in positions of power and influence — men like Burke, Santee and Populous Senior Principal Scott Radecic.

“But you know what? A lot of women at Populous are going to be able to say that Sherri is a role model for them,” Phillips said. “Give credit to those men who helped Sherri. They helped pave the way and there will eventually be more women in this field with a seat at the table.”