

WNBA President on Her Life, the League and the Olympics

L aurel J. Richie has more than three decades of experience in consumer marketing, corporate branding, public relations, and corporate management, with a long track record of developing award-winning campaigns that transform brands and drive business results. As President of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), she oversees all of the league's day-to-day business and league operations.

Prior to joining the WNBA in 2011, Richie was Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Girl Scouts of the USA, where she was responsible for the Girl Scouts' brand, communications, publishing, marketing, and web-based initiatives. She also spent time at the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather, where she worked on a series of campaigns for prominent clients, including American Express, Pepperidge Farm, Pond's, Huggies, and Kotex. She sat on Ogilvy New York's Operating Board and was a founding member of the agency's Employee Advisory Council on Diversity and Inclusion.

Richie's pro-bono clients have included the Museum for African Art, the Hospital for Special Surgery, and the New York City Commission



CELEBRITY INTERVIEW

by Kam Williams

on Human Rights. In addition, she has mentored young women and girls as part of Big Brothers Big Sisters, the 4A's Multicultural Advertising Intern Program, Xavier University's Youth Motivation Task Force, and the Advertising Educational Foundation.

A recipient of the YMCA's Black Achiever's

policy studies, Richie lives in New York City.

Kam Williams: Hi, Laurel, thanks for the time.

Laurel J. Richie: Thanks, Kam.

KW: What interested you in going from the Girl Scouts to the WNBA?

LJR: Early on in my career, when I was working at an advertising agency, I went to a very senior-level meeting and I distinctly remember the inside of the boardroom: every single seat was occupied by a man. In that moment, I made a private promise to myself

enjoyed the most where those that focused on women. This passion really came to the forefront when I made the move from advertising to the Girl Scouts and then, very clearly, when I made the decision to join the WNBA. As the longest-running women's professional sports league in the country, the WNBA is a great product comprising 132 of the best female athletes in the world. And when you look beyond the players to owners, coaches, trainers, accountants, and chief operating officers — it's a wonderful example of what women can achieve in sports and in business.

KW: How do you hope to generate greater interest in the league and its superstars like Maya Moore and Candace Parker?

LJR: The summer of 2012 is turning out to be very special. We are celebrating the 40th anniversary of Title IX and the Olympics are taking place in London, and we have seen increased interest in and exposure of our players. The WNBA is very proud of the fact that all 12 members of the U.S. Women's Senior National Team are WNBA players. For them to represent our country on an international stage is terrific. Millions around the world will see them and have the opportunity to get to know them not only as great athletes, but as interesting and inspiring women.

KW: Why is there seemingly a stigma on women's athletics which is reflected in a lag in the WNBA's ratings in comparison to the NBA's?

LJR: We are a young league — now in our 16th season — and we have seen our attendance and viewership increase for each of the past five years. Our growth is a direct result of the fact that our game is exciting and highly competitive, and our in-arena experience is a

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Award and one of Ebony Magazine's Outstanding Women in Marketing and Communications, Richie was named one of the 25 Influential Black Women in Business in 2011 by The Network Journal. A graduate of Dartmouth College with a bachelor's degree in

that I would do everything in my power to bring more diversity to these rooms where leaders gathered and decisions were made. As my career unfolded and I worked on a wide range of clients and gained experience across lots of different industries, the businesses I



Laurel Richie

ton of fun. Once people come to a game, they are hooked. In many ways, I think the WNBA is changing the way America views women and is having a positive impact on the way America views professional athletes. We're showing the world what women can be as athletes and what athletes can be as citizens.

KW: To what do you credit you're not only climbing the corporate ladder but breaking the glass ceiling and reaching the pinnacle of success in the business world, a rarity for African-American females?

LJR: My parents. As far back as I can remember, their commitment to making a positive impact on the communities in which they lived and worked was equal only to their commitment to helping my sisters, brother, and me achieve our dreams.

KW: Tell me a little about what mentoring young black girls means to you?

LJR: Throughout my career, I have benefitted from the experience and counsel of a wide range of people who took a very personal interest in me. As a result, I am always happy to share lessons learned from my journey with others. I am particularly passionate about mentoring young black girls. While we are a very diverse group, there is a special bond that connects us to each other. When I work with them, I see them in me and I believe they see me in them. By coming together, we are able to show the world the power and the promise of black girls.

KW: Will part of your mission involve also encouraging your WNBA players to see themselves as role models and to devote more of their free time to mentoring?

LJR: I don't have to encourage our players to be positive role models, as that is something that has always been important to them and something that they very willingly embrace. Whether it's through the WNBA Cares program or through their own initiatives, WNBA players give as much off the court as they do on the court. They are committed to making a positive impact on the communities in which they live and work, and they do it in very different ways: Tamika Catchings and Swin Cash mentor young girls on self-esteem through their foundations; Tina Charles helped build a school in Africa with her personal donation; Ruth Riley travels the world to bring attention to global diseases. The list goes on. I am very proud of all our players as they truly are inspiring role models for young girls — and young boys.

KW: How would you like the world to perceive the WNBA players participating in the Olympic Games this year?

LJR: On a professional level, these athletes are quite simply 12 of the best female basketball players in the world. On a personal level, each one has an interesting and unique story to tell about her journey to the Olympics. Over the next two weeks — and beyond — I would like the world to get to know them as athletes, citizens of the world and fabulous women.

KW: What other changes do you envision implementing during your tenure?

LJR: We will continue to focus on attendance and income, as those are our key measures of bringing more and more people to the game and growing our fan base. We are actively doing

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5625 NE MLK Jr. Blvd.

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