

EARLY YEARS: I grew up in Colville, Washington, where my parents ran a gift store. My dad taught me what true service is. People would call us on a Sunday because they had forgotten their wife's birthday and he would go into town to open up the store. He didn't think twice about it.

AMBITION: I told my parish priest at age 6 that I wanted to be president of the United States. At age 7, I loved watching the Democratic national convention on television. I grew up in the age of great politicians like Maggie [Warren Magnuson] and [Henry] Jackson. I planned to go to law school, then into politics after college, but I thought I should work for nine months first. I wanted weekends free so I could spend time with my husband. That's how I got into banking.

COLUMBIA BANK: When we started Columbia Bank 18 years ago, we did something unusual. We decided to offer almost all the products and services that big banks have, like private banking and cash management. Later, we added a trust department. It was something very few community banks did. We didn't want our bankers to have half a toolbox. I think [the diverse offerings] helped to accelerate our growth. The first day we opened, we had people lined up to open accounts with us. It was one of the most exciting days in my professional life. Puget Sound National Bank, which had 50 percent of the local market, had just been acquired by KeyBank. I think the community perceived the hometown bank was gone. We wanted to fill those shoes. We went on to make seven small acquisitions until March 2008, when everything came to a screeching halt.

FINANCIAL CRISIS: We always knew we would make it through because we had a traditional balance sheet. [During the boom years] analysts were always asking, "Why aren't you earning as much as Frontier Bank [which invested heavily in real estate]?" I told them, "This is not our business model." Even at the top of the market, only 12 percent of our loans were residential construction. We make loans to business owners and their employees funded by retail deposits. If we loan a lot of money to a business, we take real estate as security. So we have a lot of commercial real estate in our loan portfolio, but it's all tied to a relationship.

EXPANSION: When we saw the markets loosen up, we raised capital. We've since made five more acquisitions [of troubled banks]. We expect to see opportunities to acquire more banks.

RISK: I'm worried that some banks are jeopardizing structure and safety to put loans on the books. It's way too early to be taking big risks, particularly in commercial real estate. We want to make loans and we will be competitive, but

banks are going to get in trouble again if they make loans with no guarantees and no equity.

GOAL: We want to be the Pacific Northwest's regional community bank. Being a community bank means that you are involved in a lot of different things and through our involvement we strengthen the community. It's a different style of banking. I don't think that anyone has become the old Rainier Bank or the old Seafirst. They had such marvelous community ties. We believe that the value of our franchise is embedded in customers and our employees. If we take good care of our customers and our employees, then our shareholders will benefit.

CULTURE: We believe you can't be a great place to bank if you aren't a great place to work. We have teams of bankers from other banks that approach us and say they would really like to be a part of Columbia because of our culture. We are very picky about who we hire. But we have been fortunate to attract very strong bankers. We had a salary freeze in place for over a year. Our employees understood that if we gave people raises we would probably have had to lay people off. Everyone was willing to make short-term sacrifices for their fellow employees; those are the kinds of people we attract.

GROWTH: As we grow, our key concern is how to preserve our culture. Not a week goes by that the management team doesn't discuss that. Of course, it's important to have financial strength. And we've been a dynamic, evolving company. But we don't want to just grow to put more zeros after our assets. We really want to continue to be who we are, but also to provide great opportunities for our people and to really take excellent care of our customers. We have a two-day Columbia banking school where new employees get to know who we are and how important our culture is. We take very seriously being among [Seattle Business magazine's] 100 Best Companies to Work For. We slice and dice the data from the survey and share it with our staff.

WOMEN CEOS: I think management is more a product of the individual than gender. Each one of us in our executive team is as different as night and day. That brings different conversations to the table. But listening is an important quality in a CEO, and women are typically good listeners.

TACOMA: We don't do as good a job as we could to talk about the good things of Tacoma. I bring people here as often as I can so they can see the nature, the water and the affordable real estate. There is a lot here to attract companies.