

Perdue's Passion

An Interview with
Mitzi Perdue, Founder, Healthy U of Delmarva

EDITORS' NOTE Mitzi Perdue holds degrees from Harvard University and George Washington University. She is a past President of the 35,000-member American Agri-Women and was one of the U.S. Delegates to the United Nations Conference on Women in Nairobi. She currently writes for the Academy of Women's Health, and GEN, Genetic Engineering & Biotechnology News, and the Salisbury Daily Times. Most recently, she authored an iPhone App, *B Healthy U*. She is also an artist and designer of *EveningEggs™* (ostrich egg purses) and *EggScapes™* (handcrafted miniature scenes in eggs). Perdue is the author of *The I Want to EggScape™ Book*, A Quick Guide To Successful Media Appearances, a biography of her husband, Frank Perdue, and six cookbooks, including *The Farmers' Cookbook series* and *The Perdue Chicken Cookbook*. She was a syndicated columnist for 22 years, first with *Capitol News in California* and then nationally with *Scripps Howard*.



Mitzi Perdue

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Healthy U of Delmarva* (www.healthyu.delmarva.org), is a 9000-member organization that encourages healthy lifestyles through awards for outstanding workplace wellness programs. It began in 2002, a result of the wonderful generosity of civic leader Mitzi Perdue. In 2007, she entrusted Salisbury University to take her efforts to the next level by providing additional resources. *Healthy U* has touched the lives of 11,000 members across the Delmarva region; partnered with 140 organizations to offer support, resources, and discounts to members; presented over \$180,000 in annual HUEY Award prizes and community grants; and operated free summer camps for over 150 area children.

Why has philanthropy been so important to you?

I often saw my father, one of the co-founders of the Sheraton Hotel chain, writing checks to different charities. He told me, "The greatest pleasure that my money ever gave me is in giving it away."

I was also influenced by my mother, who used to say, "If you want to be happy, think what you can do for somebody else; if you want to be miserable, think about what is owed to you."

She also said, "The givers of the world are happy; the takers are miserable."

Both parents wanted their children to be happy, so they encouraged philanthropy.

With all of the need out there, how do you determine what to support?

My late husband Frank said that in his entire life he felt there had never been an unworthy cause. My father had said the same thing. Since many causes reflect real need, the question is how to choose among them.

I recommend causes that engage your heart. You'll have a greater interest in them and you'll probably do more for them. In the end, you'll be more effective.

Which charities are you most passionate about?

Number one is military. There is nothing that we civilians can do to sufficiently demonstrate our appreciation for what our military does.

Partly why this engages me is because, over the years, I have gotten to know more than 1,000 military men and women. When my husband was still alive, there were 82 Perdue associates who were deployed overseas in Desert Storm. Frank communicated with every one of them every month.

He started by sending them each a DVD player, and each month would send them packages with current movies. I would write and ask which magazines they would like to have that they could not get where they were.

I maintained a database of the things they liked, and I would send their wives or sweethearts gifts as well. We heard from our associates that these letters and gifts meant the world to them. Among other things, it meant "bragging rights" when they could show their fellow soldiers that Frank, the head of the company, had written them. Over the years, I kept on corresponding with and sending gifts to soldiers, often military police because we had this ongoing joke that since my initials are MP, they were wearing my colors into battle.

In 2013, I gave a party in Salisbury, Maryland for the 72 wives and sweethearts of the 115th Military Police Battalion, based in Afghanistan. I had a local TV station shoot interviews with each family member. Then I mailed a thumb drive with the interview to each soldier so he or she would get a personalized message from his or her family members.

What else are you involved in?

I particularly care about children who don't have both parents.

My wish for the world is that everyone can be all they can be. If your father isn't part of the family or your mother has an addiction problem, it's an obstacle to being all you can be.

This is why I love Catholic Big Sisters/Big Brothers. The changes they make in young people's lives are astonishing.

What is your overall approach to philanthropy?

I have a two-pronged approach to philanthropy. One is the satisfaction of connecting with individuals, but I also like a broader approach since I grew up in the hotel industry and have always had the idea that good things happen when you get people together.

With philanthropy, if you don't cultivate your donors or appreciate your volunteers through recognition events, over the years they may drift away. But, it's tough to spend money on donor cultivation or volunteer appreciation when that money was given to help carry out the organization's mission.

I have made my apartment available to charities for donor cultivation or volunteer appreciation events, often 50 or 100 people at a time. I would provide the food, beverages, and space and the charity could choose who they wanted to invite. I did this over 100 times, and I know there were cases where it had a significant impact.

I believe that contributing to strengthening the relationship between the charity and its supporters might be even more helpful than my simply writing a check.

In creating a brand that has stood the test of time, what did your father see that others didn't?

This question applies both to my father and husband. Their bedrock value was integrity – if you say you're going to do something, you need to do it. They also both put huge value on quality and service. Sheraton was always proud of delivering superior value for the dollar. Certainly, Frank's whole life was built on that same approach.

With all you have done, what's left for you to accomplish?

I still write about local philanthropy and how individual charities are addressing community needs. I also talk about the needs of the charity. I have been told that every article I write brings a response, whether in terms of volunteers or donations. I guess my real wish for what's left is to write a nationally syndicated column that would focus on national philanthropies and, in that way, encourage more donations and more volunteers. ●