

Doug Moe: Joan Collins' enthusiasm for her job is easy to see — she's had it for 44 years

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When I first asked Joan Collins for an interview, she did exactly what I knew she would do. She suggested I write about one of her clients instead.

"I want to write about you."

"Why me?" Collins said.

I'd called her because I had received a news tip. On Oct. 1 — the day Collins celebrated 44 years of running her company, Joan Collins Publicity, in Madison — Collins had done the unthinkable. She'd given herself a half-day off.

Collins had used the rare free time to take a tour of Epic in Verona and hear a talk on entrepreneurship.

What, that's not your idea of a day off?

Well, maybe you're not up at 4:30 and on your computer every morning, either. Collins is, and she'll have checked the news, been in touch with clients by e-mail, and otherwise jumped-started the day before leaving the house for her regular 6:30 a.m. game at the John Powless Tennis Center.

"I don't do vacations," Collins said, when we finally got around to the interview last week. She arrived by bicycle, her favored mode of transportation.

She estimates she works 70 hours a week, but the thing is, she doesn't really see it as work. Collins loves pitching stories about her clients. When she believes in one, she won't let it go.

Collins worked three years to get a piece about the Lake Geneva Cruise Line's boat-jumping mail carriers on "Sunday Morning" on CBS. She knew it was a perfect feature for the correspondent Bill Geist, but she couldn't get anyone in New York to listen.

Then one Sunday morning in spring 2005 Collins was watching the program and saw a segment on peer pressure in schools. Something clicked. When the piece ended, Collins sat down at her computer and sent an e-mail to the show with the subject line "pier pressure."

The next morning, a CBS producer called. A few weeks later Geist strolled out onto a pier in Lake Geneva and said, "This is our type of story." It aired in June 2005, the same month the State Journal published a story on the pier-jumpers.

Collins had been at the publicity game four decades by then. She grew up in Wisconsin Rapids, and studied journalism at Stephens College in Missouri and then the University of Missouri before moving to Madison in the summer of 1963.

Collins' mother was living in Madison at the time. Joan, looking for a summer job, wandered into the advertising agency on upper State Street run by Art Towell. Walking in the door she nearly collided with a well-dressed executive. Collins said she was looking for a job, and the executive, who turned out to be Towell, eventually asked her to write up something on one of his clients, the Simon House restaurant, which had just won an award. Then he offered her a job.

"The luckiest five minutes of my life," Collins said of the initial encounter.

At summer's end, rather than return as scheduled to Missouri, Collins kept the job and finished her education at UW-Madison. On Oct. 1, 1966, she started Joan Collins Publicity. She'd bought a desk for \$25 and printed 75 copies of letterhead stationery.

She needed a loan to even do that much, and later, Collins asked the banker why he had taken a chance on a woman at a time when few women were running businesses.

The banker said, "When you've got someone in front of your desk so excited that they're jumping up and down, it's hard to say no."

She has sustained that enthusiasm through the years, in part by seeking out clients whose work she appreciates. Long associated with Midwest ski resorts, Collins was in the meeting years ago when Tony Wise, who ran the Telemark resort up north, came up with the idea for an American Birkebeiner.

Collins chuckled while remembering she tried to talk Wise out of it. She drafted employees out of the resort restaurant to complete the first field and watched in happy astonishment as the event subsequently exploded in popularity.

"I absolutely love it," Collins said of the work that has been her life. "It's just as exciting now as it was my first day."

She smiled. "The other thing is, I don't know how to do anything else. I can't even cook."

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