



A leader who is a friend, mentor, family devotee

By Emmy Lou J. Burchette

MC leads the John M. Belk Endowment, a nonprofit focused on helping North Carolinians attain higher education

Her work and influence span the nation while North Carolina is the lucky beneficiary of her greatest focus.

MC Belk Pilon

A founding client and board member of New Republic Partners, MC Belk Pilon is widely known as the leader of the John M. Belk Endowment. Her work and influence span the nation while North Carolina is the lucky beneficiary of her greatest focus.

As powerful a leader as MC is in education, philanthropic and workforce circles, she is equally known as a friend, mentor and family devotee.

When I asked her to tell me a bit about herself, her answer was immediate and concise. “I’m a mother and a wife,” she said with pride in her voice. “My husband and I have three kids who are lots of fun and keep me busy supporting their interests, which range from music to sports and outdoor activities such as fly fishing.”

Family is everything to this southern born and bred lady with a huge heart, a quick smile and a quiet determination to make a difference in the lives of others.

A competitive swimmer and track athlete in high school and college, MC knows how to set goals, work hard to achieve them and grab the brass ring. But her inner drive is not immediately evident, resting behind an exterior that is genuinely friendly, approachable and kind. Laughing as she said it, she reported overhearing her son once describing her as “goofy” to his siblings.

MC continues to pursue her love of sports and the outdoors as an avid hiker and runner, enjoying both easy runs through local neighborhoods and challenging trails on Rocky Mountain peaks. A reader, fond of autobiographies and history, MC enjoys learning about people and thinking about how their life lessons apply to our world today. That

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perspective spills over into her work on improving educational opportunities and workforce readiness of North Carolinians.

Active as a board member of a variety of organizations, MC pursues initiatives that are forward thinking, inclusive and innovative.

She is all of these things – and more. Much more.

Inheriting a Legacy

MC leads the John M. Belk Endowment, a nonprofit focused on helping North Carolinians attain higher education degrees and certifications needed to fill meaningful, good paying jobs, and at the same time aiding the state of North Carolina in building a skilled workforce to support the state's economic growth.

MC's parents, Claudia and John Belk, greatly valued education and saw it as the key to sustaining economic prosperity in North Carolina. John provided for an endowment in his estate plans and the John M. Belk Endowment was funded at his death in 2007.

As a young adult, MC found herself with the honor and privilege of determining the specifics of how the endowment would be focused and managed. She was eager to honor her parents' interest in education and the state, so she began by researching the best practices in philanthropy.

A Serendipitous Meeting

That research led her to read, "The Splendid Legacy," a volume MC describes as a "lovely book," authored by Ginny Esposito, executive director of the Center for Family Philanthropy. MC set up an appointment with Ginny, who gave her a number of valuable recommendations for people to talk with in the professional philanthropy field. But most

importantly, as MC was leaving the center's offices, Ginny met her at the elevator saying, "I want to work with you" – and in that moment became an invaluable mentor for MC.

Ginny was the first person who asked MC whether she had a desire to become personally involved in the work of the foundation, inquiring "what do you want to do, what do you want your role to be?" Those questions spurred MC to become an active leader of the endowment, not just a custodian.

Developing a Vision

MC worked with Ginny and others to frame a vision for ways the endowment could make a lasting impact. She points to the work of David Dobson at MDC, a nonprofit dedicated to helping vulnerable people in the South thrive. He introduced her to a wide variety of philanthropic approaches and helped her identify three key opportunities: challenges in access to education, the need for degree completion from both high school and higher education levels, and the important links between economic prosperity and the relevance of workforce preparedness.

These components led MC to view North Carolina's community college system as an invaluable platform with which she could partner. "North Carolina has the third largest community college system in the nation, including 58 unique colleges," she said. "Our system has a unique operating model, with each college operating independently, managed with the help of an elected local board and having the ability to hire and fire their president. There is a system office in Raleigh, and its primary role is to help the colleges share ideas on best practices and to convene businesses and colleges to leverage opportunities for collaboration. This system works well because local needs are the priority for each campus."

Through these personal connections and a strong collaboration with the community college system, MC tied the work of the endowment to her parents' beliefs, the prosperity of her home state, and her own brand of thoughtful philanthropy grounded in research, metrics and knowledge sharing.

Lessons from Retail

Growing up hearing her father recount successful strategies at the Belk Stores located throughout the South and learning from her personal experience working in the Mooresville store, MC knew a flexible strategy that accommodates changing trends would be key to the success of the endowment. She also understood the value of listening.

"I knew we needed to do a lot of listening to educators, students and businesses in our state. We also had the opportunity to learn from efforts underway in other states, to take the lessons learned elsewhere and adapt them to our work. That's what my father and others did at Belk. They took best practices from high performing stores and adapted those approaches to the stores in other markets."

She also learned in the retail environment that future trends often require new skills. "It is important for education to be focused on the future, to be focused on long-term workforce needs, one of which is the movement toward a technology-based economy," she notes. "We must be intentional about the skills training available to our citizens and those newcomers who move to the state."

Service to Others

Mark Reed, managing director at the John M. Belk Endowment, describes the working environment MC has instilled as collaborative, "a place where everyone feels valued, you are able to do good work and make good

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things happen. There is a humble nature to this place, we don't talk about money, we focus on how to best serve others in North Carolina."

He paints a picture of MC's leadership style as one where she first educates herself on a topic, then connects with those on the national level who have developed expertise. "Her research is extensive. Once she has settled on taking action, her next step is to identify where the endowment can make a deep and lasting impact."

Setting Goals

One key to the endowment's success is the goal setting MC champions. Whether she creates a goal for the endowment or supports one set by others, she works to build consensus across the state's leaders in education and business and then follows up with tactical approaches to enact change and communication on progress until the goal is met.

A good example of this approach is the endowment's work to help students utilize the millions of dollars available through the FAFSA program. In 2019, North Carolina students left \$150 million in scholarship dollars unused—a problem so glaring that MC utilized endowment funds to spur action. The endowment worked collaboratively with myFutureNC to boost that nonprofit's statewide "First in FAFSA" initiative and create a communication campaign to reach both education leaders and prospective grantees. The effort engaged all the state's school superintendents to sponsor districtwide FAFSA sign-up events. This collaborative approach yielded immediate far-reaching benefits, not only increasing FAFSA applications, but also raising awareness among teachers, guidance counselors,

staff, parents and students about the financial avenues available to students pursuing higher education.

Another goal-oriented initiative led by the endowment is the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University which focuses on supporting community colleges across North Carolina and the nation improve student access and success. Students at the center acquire competencies to lead transformational change in community colleges, with improved student outcomes as the ultimate goal.

To support the work of the center, the endowment helps fund several programs: executive leadership programs for community college presidents and trustees, research initiatives to enable community college practitioners to quickly enact meaningful changes at their institutions, and support efforts for the doctoral program in the form of executive mentors, scholarships, writing and data coaches, and professional development.

Throughout these and other initiatives underway at the endowment you see MC's impact in the form of tactical, measurable initiatives tied to a big strategy.

The Way Forward

MC is moving forward with new initiatives to engage partners across the nation in creating lasting change in education. "We must continue to work intentionally and responsibly to be at the forefront of change," she says.

A mother, a wife, a leader, a collaborator...the list of MC's attributes is long and varied...and I'm certain that her impact is only just beginning.



Top: MC runs steps at Truist Field in Leukemia Fight for Air Challenge. Bottom: MC hiking near Vail, Colorado.