

## **Owner of Aly Sterling Philanthropy shares tests and triumphs in new book**

Aly Sterling, founder and president of the Aly Sterling Philanthropy, will be the first to tell you that she's lived in many places. Not just because as a child her family moved around a lot, either. Those youthful sojourns helped to mold her, but it was her journey toward birthing a successful million-dollar company that took her places she'd never imagined as a child: the Region of Orange-Barrel Obstacles; the Land of Unscripted; the Land of Self-Doubt.

Sounds scary, but as Aly shares with disarming candor in her new book — *Thirty-Seven* — those were the places that nudged and sometimes pushed her to grow the most.

First, though, let's back up to the years before she hit 37, which she identifies in the book's subtitle as *The year I stopped making excuses, embraced my power and launched my million-dollar business*. Aly came, she says, from a family background of small business owners and entrepreneurs, "so I always had an inclination that way."

Her father, who owned a mortgage company, encouraged her to get work experience outside the family business, so after earning her graduate degree in sociology from The University of Toledo, she entered the world of nonprofits, steadily working upward into administrative roles. Marriage and three children didn't dim her enthusiasm for the field, but it did get her thinking that she wanted to start her own company, one that would be related to the nonprofit sector.

"I drove a lot of people around me crazy for two years as I worked to choose the kind of company," she says. "The philanthropy aspect was the part I wasn't sure about. The direction could have been marketing instead."

Philanthropy it was — and now, after years of what Aly calls "raising this baby, and you can call it an ugly baby, because at first it was," she heads a highly successful firm with a hand-picked team of specialists. Together they help guide nonprofits, foundations, educational institutions and others through the complexities of fundraising, strategic planning and board management.

Aly credits word of mouth for much of her company's success: "Every year, 54 percent of our clients are repeats. It's gratifying to know we've done good work for them, and we spend a lot of time nurturing those relationships.

"The other half of our clients represents many presentations and conferences, which can result in prospective clients. We also do a lot pro bono, both to give back and maybe down the line to have returns. We can't do a lot, so I try to be selective and prudent, while being everywhere we should be."

Professional investments have paid off, she adds, such as membership in the Giving Institute, a national organization she credits with strengthening Aly Sterling Philanthropy's reputation and brand awareness.

Her enthusiasm quickens when the subject of the UT Family Business Center enters the conversation. "That membership really came at the right time! Maybe five years ago, I hit a plateau. I wanted to take the company in a new direction and I wasn't getting the inspiration I needed. That's what I was looking for when I joined the Center — and I really found it.

"Even though we've been in associations specific to our industry, the place I really thrive from a knowledge and growth perspective is the Family Business Center, especially in my affinity group. Learning from other industries

is a habit I've always had — plus it's priceless to have that confidential group where you can be vulnerable and share."

Sharing in a business comes in many forms, she says, mentioning the way that technology like PayPal (which many small businesses use because it's free) can cut the connection between nonprofits and their donors. "If I donate to a nonprofit via PayPal, that money actually goes to the PayPal Foundation, which then distributes the monies to the nonprofit via a grant. So technically, I'm not a donor to that nonprofit — and they don't get my address or even my name. Relationships are not created, and nonprofits rely on relationships."

The desire to share how crucial relationships are in a business, in fact, was a main reason behind her book. Although it contains many sound tips, *37* doesn't skirt the emotional rollercoaster of Aly's journey to success. "It's my personal history as an entrepreneur, but I wrote the book because I believe that not enough emphasis is placed on the emotional aspect of starting and maintaining a business," she says.

"Starting your own business means risks and vulnerabilities — not just financial ones, either. There are obstacles — orange barrels — you don't know exist, people who might not have your back the way you thought they would. These all limit the potential we have to accomplish a great deal.

"We don't talk about the emotional cost of starting a business. MBA programs would do students a service by talking about it more, because it's very real."

Pointing out the well-known statistic that only 25 percent of new businesses last more than 10 years, she adds a startling corollary: "Even though female-owned companies make up 39 percent of all businesses, only 1.7 percent of them generate more than \$1 million in revenue."

She pauses, and you can hear the deep sincerity in her words. "I believe that I have an important story to share. I beat the odds in longevity and in revenue, and what happened to me will resonate for many business owners, or people thinking of starting a business.

"I want more female businesses to be successful, and business owners as a whole not to shortchange themselves on their way to success."