

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## Long-time CPA Gail Markham at peace with life, work

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Gail Markham's photographs fill the walls of a boardroom at her financial consulting firm in Fort Myers (there is also an office in Naples), Markham Norton Mosteller Wright & Company, P.A.

The pictures are from a trip along the Seine River in France. They capture the area's tranquility, but also its complex color and style. And if art inadvertently reveals the inner life of the artist, the photographs point to a sense of tranquility in Ms. Markham, 57.

It's something she said she acquired only in the last few years. But getting there took the willpower of a tireless fighter or an eternal optimist. She overcame a childhood marked by abuse and opened her own CPA (Certified Public Accountant) firm at a time when women were discouraged from leadership positions.

A Florida native from St. Petersburg, Ms. Markham put in two years at the University of Florida before heading north. She graduated from the University of Maryland. After school, she sent out a fistful of applications and interviewed with an accounting firm in Fort Myers, where the partners were overly concerned with her ability to bear children.

"All of them asked me when I was going to have a baby," she said. "One partner said 'I don't know what questions to ask you because I've never

interviewed a woman before.'"

She got the job. But over the next four years, she watched men do half the work she did and make partner. When Ms. Markham approached the firm about becoming a partner, the male directors insisted, "You don't want to make partner, to make decisions, have responsibilities."

Undeterred, she left the firm and opened her own in 1979, at the age of 28. One of the people she had worked for told her it wouldn't work out, but in three months her business was in the black.

Thirty years later, the firm is steadfast in Fort Myers and Naples, providing financial help and advice for businesses in medicine, construction, contract labor, the service industry and professionals like doctors or lawyers. She has about 1,800 clients in all.

Ms. Markham took continuing education courses and specializes in financial advice for litigators. Her designations include certifications in financial forensics and as a family law mediator. She is the leading financial consultant used by the 20th Circuit Judicial Court.

Her job is to help sort out what assets belong to who and why. She helps finalize inheritances, marriages, divorces, fraud, personal injury cases, workers compensation and financial damages in wrongful death cases.

In 2006, she was asked by a 20th Circuit judge to chair the board of PACE Center in Fort Myers. The center targets girls from the ages of 12 to 18, young



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY  
Gail Markham

women who are at risk for drug abuse, teen pregnancy and dropping out of school.

The role compelled her to be open about the physical and sexual abuse she endured from a violent, alcoholic father. It took place on a near-daily basis during her childhood, in St. Petersburg, Bradenton, Sarasota and Texas.

"People had always seen me as this CPA and business leader," she said. "So it was a very raw, revealing process that I went through. It's also very healing."

In some ways, those experiences dove-

tail with one of her specialties: helping people separate assets in a divorce.

"I do so much more than help them with the numbers," she said. "I help them heal and grow as a person so they can walk away with hope."

"As I tell my clients, you are allowed to have a pity party for five minutes, then that's it. I don't have patience for people playing the victim role for too long."

Ms. Markham may seem like one tough cookie. But she also compared herself to soft-serve ice cream.

"My past has made me a lot stronger and more compassionate than people realize," she said. "There's nothing I haven't seen or heard or lived in my own life."

The next hurdle she faces is guiding her firm through the recession.

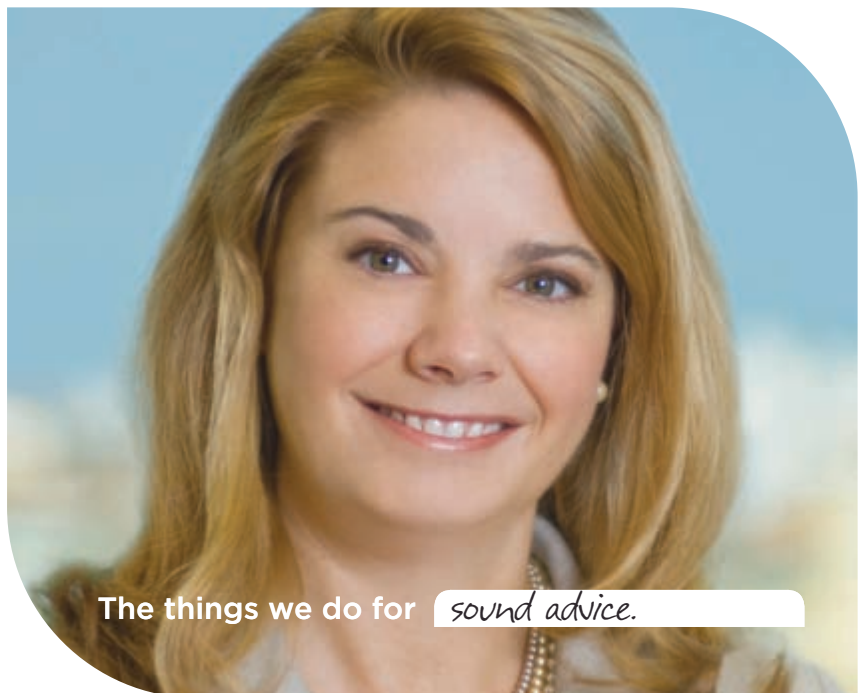
"It's not easy right now," she said. "Our job right now is really not fun. It's stressful. Getting people financially squared away in this economy is sometimes not even doable."

Twelve years ago, she had a daughter. Some of the baby pictures are huge color prints hanging in her office. Besides photography, Ms. Markham is reflecting on enjoying the life she's worked for and made peace with.

"I like warm weather," she said. "I like the beaches. I like the sun, the tropical climate. I think I learned that in Maryland."

She also likes to work out, ski, golf and dance.

"I like to have a good time," she said. ■



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