

HI **MV@MVANDEBERG.COM** ▾

Golden globalist

Investors can make money while helping to create a better world, says corporate luminary Marsha Vande Berg. She believes Covid-19 is an opportunity to promote sustainability investing and corporate responsibility.

🕒 SAT, MAY 09, 2020 - 5:50 AM

LEON HADAR ✉ btworld@sph.com.sg



"The havoc that Covid-19 has been wreaking on American society and economy demonstrates to businesses the importance of shifting the focus from short-term worries over profitability to long-term societal and economic problems." - Marsha Vande Berg. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARSHA VANDE BERG

LET'S imagine a world sans Covid-19. After reading her recent op-ed in The Business Times on sustainability investing, I decide that I must have a talk with global strategist Marsha Vande Berg.

So I sound out my Business Times editor about flying to San Francisco where Dr Vande Berg lives and works.

And there, I'd hold a Raffles Conversation with the corporate adviser in her office in an historic building in the financial district in downtown San Francisco.

Well, as you probably guessed by now, I did not have an opportunity to visit Dr Vande Berg's office which she was ordered to vacate in the middle of March, following the coronavirus outbreak and after California governor Gavin Newsom ordered a shutdown and six Bay Area counties issued shelter-in-place orders.

Instead, thanks to Zoom and other communication technology, this interview is being conducted while I remain quarantined in my home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and Dr Vande Berg, isolated with her partner in a cottage in a resort compound in Northern California's Napa Valley, appears on my computer screen.

SEE ALSO

68-year-old Singaporean man dies from Covid-19; death toll now at 21

Stay updated with BT newsletters

Your email address

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms and Conditions](#).

It's been over a month since California's shelter-in-place orders kicked in, and Dr Vande Berg - who otherwise travels regularly on business - has settled into her new routine. Staying in and working from the cottage, she admits, does not involve a lot of personal or professional sacrifices on her part.

Mover and shaker

"I am adapting and trying to keep a regular schedule," she says. The previous day she was able to participate in a meeting of the RAND Centre for Asia Pacific Policy, and in the evening she took part in a virtual conference of the International Women's Forum (IWF) that includes members in Asia. "And we did not even have to wear masks," she quips.

From her temporary home and business headquarters in the Napa Valley, Dr Vande Berg can enjoy the stunning scenery of the area, takes walks, and bikes a few miles to a local grocery store to replenish her food supplies.

"I recognise how fortunate I am when I watch on television what the first responders and healthcare workers are doing and read about the sacrifice made by those delivering food and the mail," she notes. "It is heartbreaking to learn how Indian women have to respond to the epidemic, without being able to wear masks."

Zoom and other virtual conferencing technology are great, but Dr Vande Berg cannot wait to return back "to normal", including to her office in San Francisco and to her home in Marin County.

And she misses the trips to Asia that have become part of her professional life as a global business mover and shaker.

Dr Vande Berg, who was previously CEO of Pacific Pension & Investment Institute, tells me that she has come a long way from growing up in a small town in South Dakota in a family of modest means to performing now on the world stage and becoming a high-profile international business consultant.

She is a lifetime member of the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations and sits on the boards of many international companies and non-profit organisations.

Dr Vande Berg is also a member of the President's Leadership Council of The Asia Foundation, a director of the Japan Society Northern California board, and is an academic council member of the International Financial Forum, a China-based think tank.

Intellectual odyssey

Today well-to-do families prepare their sons and daughters for that kind of impressive career in government, business or the law, by ensuring that they travel abroad, become proficient in several languages, and get accepted to Harvard or Stanford.

"I was raised in a rural area in what we would describe today as a 'red state', in a town with a population of 15,000, a very homogenous community in terms of demographics and culture, with not a lot of exposure to what was going on in the rest of the country, not to mention on the international scene," she remembers.

Her father, who worked as a baker, and her mother were proud when she and her siblings graduated from high school and encouraged them to continue with their studies.

Dr Vande Berg credits her mom and maternal grandmother - members of a family of immigrants from Holland - with pushing her to study ("both my brother and I earned PhDs") and to pursue a professional career, at a time when "that was not necessarily what most young women were dreaming about".

So after getting access to loans and stipends that were available for bright students in the late 1960s, Dr Vande Berg began her academic and intellectual odyssey.

It started with undergraduate work at the University of Iowa, University of Wuerzburg, Germany and the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and led to a Master's degree from Duke University and a PhD in German Studies and Fine Arts from Vanderbilt University.

In the process, the somewhat provincial young woman with a conservative upbringing opened up to the world beyond the American Midwest, taking her first trip abroad, to Germany, and becoming fluent in German.

And after considering teaching as a profession she ended up pursuing a successful career in journalism and developing an interest in politics and public affairs. That helped shape her liberal values and her internationalist orientation, and eventually was instrumental in her getting involved in business and finance in Asia.

Dr Vande Berg recalls the socially and politically turbulent days of the 1970s in America, with race tensions and the struggle for civil rights topping the agenda, when while completing her doctoral studies she landed a job in *The Tennessean*.

Under the leadership of the legendary John Seigenthaler, the newspaper became a prominent progressive voice in the South, not only in advancing civil rights for blacks but also in promoting equal rights for women.

It was difficult not to be impacted by the political zeitgeist of that time, and Dr Vande Berg credits Mr Seigenthaler and her work at *The Tennessean* for encouraging her to start "transcending geographic boundaries and cultures" and to fulfil her commitment to informing and educating people "that has remained at the heart of my professional aspirations".

After serving as a metro editor and a Washington correspondent with *The Tennessean*, Dr Vande Berg went on to hold editorial and management positions in several media organisations, including *The San Diego Union*, *Orange County Register*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*.

And then after acquiring with her partner a Northern California weekly, *Ferndale Enterprise*, she became its editor-in-chief and helped return it to profitability, "a source of immense pride and a capstone to my career as a working journalist". It also taught her an important lesson - that you can make money and at the same time also serve your community.

In a way, there is a straight line that leads from her career in journalism (which she viewed as an agent for social change in America) to her current effort to promote the notion that in addition to protecting the interests of their shareholders, financial institutions and businesses should also regard the concerns of their stakeholders. The latter includes the company's human capital, the supply chains on which it depends, the community in which it operates, and the avenue for that communication through the boardroom.

Dr Vande Berg believes that an agenda that emphasises the need to protect the environment, to consider the long-term interests of society, and to improve the quality of governance that oversees corporate strategies, or the ESG (environmental, social, and

governance) risk factors, is now being embraced by many of the pension and sovereign funds she works with as well as by the leaders of Corporate America.

"The statement issued by the Business Roundtable last year that called on its members to start paying more attention to the interests of their stakeholders and to the way their policies affect the societies in which they operate was a clear sign that the mindset of America's CEOs is changing," says Dr Vande Berg.

"The havoc that Covid-19 has been wreaking on American society and economy demonstrates to businesses the importance of shifting the focus from short-term worries over profitability to long-term societal and economic problems," she argues.

From that perspective, she thinks that the total inadequacy of the American and global healthcare system, coupled with the continuing challenge of climate change, will produce more momentum towards sustainability investment and corporate governance.

A more diverse and younger generation of business people who understand that the markets reward companies with sustainable business practices is accelerating this process of change, that globalisation helped to advance, according to Dr Vande Berg.

In addition to making the world more productive and wealthier, globalisation, she says, has also been an agent for social and political change, particularly in Asia.

After leaving her "storied career in journalism" behind, and through her work as a corporate director, she has been playing a role in all of that, in particular in helping integrate Asia into the global economy and in facilitating business ties between China and the United States.

Hence the remarkable progress she had witnessed in the American South in the 1970s is now taking place across the Pacific, a part of the world towards which she was beginning to shift her attention after being selected in 2002 as the inaugural Asia studies fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.

Her study at the Academy - a prestigious institute founded by Henry Kissinger and Richard Holbrooke together with German leadership - focused on the rise of China and the implications for the transatlantic relationship.

And while based in San Francisco, she had built a network of business partners and friends in Asia, in 1998 joining as director of the 1990 Institute, a San Francisco-based organisation devoted to enhancing Sino-American relations.

"It was an exciting time of growing US economic engagement with China and then India, and I was delighted to participate in that adventure," she remembers. "I fell in love with Asia and its people and cultures."

In particular, she is proud of her role as CEO of the Pacific Pension and Investment Institute (PPI), where for nearly 10 years between 2005 and 2014 she oversaw the organisation's engagement with global investors responsible for deploying large pools of capital in international public and private markets and completed the strategic transition from a West Coast-centric group to a global body with a major Asia-Pacific footprint.

"PPI's members faced major challenges during the 2008 global financial crisis, during a period of uncertainty and volatility for international investors, and we were able to successfully overcome them, including by facilitating a wide-ranging dialogue between our members and their counterparts in Asia," Dr Vande Berg points out.

Investment pillar

Since leaving the PPI, Dr Vande Berg has continued to be engaged in developing business and cultural ties between the US and the two biggest Asian economies, China and India.

Her work in Asia included also serving as a corporate director of Tata Capital, Singapore, at a time when the global conglomerate was undergoing a group-wide reorganisation, and as a director of Quantum Advisors, Mumbai, since 2014.

"It is a smaller firm than Tata International in terms of assets but is highly aggressive in terms of integrity and ethics and as a result, an investment pillar in critical emerging markets that intends to be a global player," she says.

She has also been witnessing the growing tensions between Washington and Beijing, with more American companies expressing growing disenchantment about doing business in China.

"It all started before Donald Trump was elected as president, but there is no doubt that his protectionist approach has provided more momentum to those Americans who are advocating deglobalisation and the decoupling of the American and Chinese economies."

But Dr Vande Berg remains bullish about globalisation and believes that political changes in Washington could help repair the relationship with China. In any case, she is keen and ready to continue in the adventure.

MARSHA VANDE BERG

International adviser and corporate director

Born in Sheldon, Iowa, US

1978: Awarded PhD in German Studies/Fine Arts, Vanderbilt University

1984: City editor, The Tennessean, Nashville

1986: Executive producer at CBS affiliate, Nashville

1988: Assistant metro editor and subsequently opinion page editor, San Francisco Chronicle

1994-95: Journalist-in-residence in Zambia and then Pakistan in final two years of USAID programme

1997: Co-owner and editor-in-chief, Ferndale Enterprise

2002: Bosch Public Policy Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin

2005-2014: CEO, Pacific Pension and Investment Institute, San Francisco

2015-2019: Corporate director, Tata Capital Pte Ltd, Singapore

2016-17: Fellow, Distinguished Careers Institute, Stanford University

CURRENT APPOINTMENTS

Instructor, Stanford University Continuing Studies, teaching sustainability, investment and corporate governance

Since 2008: Director, RAND Centre for Asia Pacific Policy

Since 2014: Independent corporate director, Quantum Advisors Pte Ltd, Mumbai

Since 2020: International adviser, GG56 Ltd