



MUOIO in Control

Jeri Muoio places family above all, from the locations she chooses to live to be near them, to jobs and summer travel destinations.

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Culture, Travel and Lifestyle

Photos: Addiel Perera, WPB Magazine

Three years ago, I interviewed Mayor Jeri Muoio in her office on 401 Clematis Street. As part of the story I was writing, I accompanied her to an open space in the building where she showed me all the plans she was working on for the city. The oversized map was filled with loose leaf sheets, each designating a different project, at the time, over 280 in all. As I leaned forward and got a closer look, the sheer sense of research, dollars, and man power representing each left me speechless. I looked up at her slim profile and saw a vibrant woman, very comfortable in her shoes.

When I arranged to meet Muoio this time, the main reason I remembered that day was that much of what I saw on that wall has been accomplished and others are in line to be wrapped up. The Walkability project was the catalyst. Seeing people walking about, sharing life with others, enjoying the beauty of West Palm Beach's downtown and waterfront, bringing more and more businesses and people to our shore is what moved Muoio then, and still does.

Her staff and those closest to her will attest that she likes to be in control, but not for power's sake, but for the unmistakable purpose of making things happen. Despite her hectic business life, she lives an unruffled and family-oriented life in West Palm Beach. It seems undeniable now that after eight years of public

service as mayor that Muoio would say no to Tallahassee or Washington DC in exchange for the simple life. When I ask what being a public official has been like for her, Muoio hesitates. Then she smiles and says, "It's been good."

Muoio has never been one who follows the picture of what society gives you. She took office in 2011 and since then, she has seen major victories, faced opposition, and worked hard to transform the quality of life of our city. In her exclusive exit interview with WPB Magazine, Muoio talks about job expectations, as well as the present, past, and future.

"I can tell you about some of my fears." Mayor Muoio says with a slight laugh. "One of them was to give a state of the city address! The thought of standing in front of a thousand people and giving a speech almost totally talked me out of running. How am I going to do that? I thought. But in terms of expectations, I'm not sure I had a lot. And that doesn't sound really good when I say that but, I had watched Louis [Frankel] for four years. I served as a city commissioner for four years, and one of the things I was absolutely sure of was that I could never keep the schedule that Louis kept. She was everywhere, every place. And I thought, I'm never going to be able to do all of that. Well, I think I have!" [laughs]



Q: So, when people would ask you, what's your legacy going to be? What was your response?

My answer wasn't about beautiful buildings or a new city hall; it was about making sure that we were serving the community as best as we possibly could.

Q: What do you consider to be one of your biggest accomplishments?

The walkability piece. Local architect Rick Gonzalez gave me the book, "Walkable City" back in 2013. He told me that I should read it, and I did. I immediately realized that this was exactly what we needed to be doing. So, we hired Jeff Speck to come in and do a study. He gave us great recommendations and from that point forward we continued to build and build on that. So that really helped sharpened our vision for what we wanted to happen to our city... for how we wanted it to look like. We have young people who want to come here and live because of the vibrancy of our city. We have businesses that want to come here because it is a place where employees want to live. So, that walkability piece sort of kicked it off and we've continued to build on that.

Q: Did everyone in the city receive this vision with open arms?

Not everybody, and that's because some people just don't want to get out of their car, which is okay. You don't have to get out of your car, but make it okay for other people to get out of their cars. I've heard stories of people who live on the 200 block of Clematis Street and work up the street on the 500 block on Clematis Street and drive to work. But again, that's their choice, and that's perfectly fine. But because we don't see ourselves doing it, let's not stop it for other people. Because that is what's attracting businesses here. Young people want to be in a place where they can walk to Starbuck's or Subculture, get coffee or lunch. Go to a bar after work with some co-workers or friends. That's what they want. And that's why we've seen businesses move to this downtown area.

Q: As you know, it's not easy to change people... And even though a mayor of a city has the ability to control things, as well as certain behaviors, how do you influence a community?

The way you do that is by educating people—sharing information, getting the word out, helping people to understand whatever you're trying to do means. I think the more you explain, show, and use examples, the better. Now, there are certain people who are never going to agree with you. I know that. But that can't stop me from doing what I think is best for the city. When you feel that you have momentum and the majority of people with you, you move forward.

Q: In your eight years of service to the City of West Palm Beach, was there anything that you really wanted to accomplish, and for whatever reason, were not able to?

Yeah, Flagler Drive. There's no reason for four lanes on Flagler Drive. We can easily have one lane going north and another going south, and use the rest for green space and make our waterfront park beautiful. But, I had a lot of opposition on that because people are afraid of the unknown, of change. I think some people had visions of droves of people coming down

to the waterfront. I really don't know their reasons. There are things that improve your property value, such as bike lanes. We spent a ton of resource on that. Property value increases where there are a lot of parks, but you know, there are some people that don't quite believe that.

Q: Aside from the Flagler Drive initiative, was there anything else that you wish you could have done for the city?

I wish I had the magic formula for homelessness. It is a very difficult problem; cities all across the country are facing it. It keeps me up at night. I want people to not be living on streets. And I know that we are doing so much in our city to help people who are living on the streets. We have program after program, we're doing our best to address it, but it hasn't gone away. And until we take a more systematic approach nationally and statewide, I don't think I can fix that as a mayor. I can make it better in my city, but there are so many factors.

Q: What do you look forward to the future, for you and the city?

For the city...It will continue to grow. And not so much about buildings and things like that, although I think that will continue to happen. But, I think we are going to see more businesses coming down here. We started the Flagler Financial District and today, we have over 250 financial services in the Flagler Financial. Because of our new taxes, businesses are very interested in coming to Florida, and they will be looking for more and more workers. We're growing jobs faster than we're growing people in our city. As I leave office, our unemployment rate at the moment is three percent.

Q: What was it when you took office in 2011?

Nine and a half percent. But, we still have 17% of people living in poverty. So, why is that when this is the best job market for people looking for jobs that we've had in a long time? Businesses and corporations are struggling to find people. We need to challenge them to reach out to the 17% who are in poverty and take a chance on them. These are veterans and ex-felons...they need jobs.

Q: And for yourself?

I'm going to ride into the sunset! [laughing] I'm in the process of developing a consulting business. No more elective office.

Q: Lastly, what do you like to do for fun? Now that you'll have a little bit more time on your hands...

My husband and I are going away for the month of May. We rented a house in Mexico. And I'd like to do more travel. My grandson is a really good soccer player and last year he was chosen to go to a special school in Germany. And this summer that special school is in Rome. So, I told him, "I'm going with you!" In between starting this business, I'm giving myself some time to do some fun things with my family. I just want to sit back and read a good book. After being on the job 24/7 for eight years, I think I'd like to do that.