

The Produce News

Mountaineer Amy Gates climbing her way to the top

By Daniel Jalil

(February 21, 2005) Since her youth, Amy Gates, 28, has made a habit of quickly climbing through the ranks at the companies for which she works.

At 15 years old, Ms. Gates took photographs for a white-water rafting company.

By 17, the company owner, who did not realize her young age, promoted her to office manager.

They paid me really well, and it was seasonal, which worked out really well because I was in college at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA, earning her degree in agriculture business with a concentration in marketing.

She maintained the job until her junior year, when she decided to pursue an internship. I got interested in produce right when I got into college in a produce marketing class. Ms. Gates grew up in Southern California in Kern River Valley, a farming community, but as a child had no direct connections to the produce industry. The internship she accepted was with Apio Fresh LLC in Guadalupe, CA. Early in the internship, Ms. Gates was regularly working the traditional produce-industry hours: 4 a.m. to 4 p.m. She considered moving into produce sales, but disliking the demanding hours, I thought I would get into the buying end.

After exploring a few opportunities post graduation, Ms. Gates took a position with Famous Software LLC in Fresno, CA, a management-software supplier for the produce industry. She worked in the firms sales department, and when I started, I had only three counties in her territory. She quickly earned more, however, securing all of Southern California and then Texas and Arizona, too. I started in the sales department, but then I parlayed into the consulting and training.

She added, Famous does a really good job of training. Its employees spend six months in the firms training program so they thoroughly learn the software and are best prepared to represent it to prospective and current clients. Ms. Gates noted that the training has particular value to employees lacking experience in the produce industry, particularly regarding unfamiliarity with the perishable nature of produce. She, however, did not have such inexperience, having studied the industry extensively in college and because of her experience at Apio.

While at Famous, Ms. Gates and a colleague were cited for their sales excellence. The duo far surpassed their sales quota and sold more dollar volume in a year than any other Famous employees.

In October, Ms. Gates left Famous to work with Frontera Produce Ltd. in Edinburg, TX, where she is involved in operations and functions as a controller. It is kind of a COO, CFO position working right under the owners, though she noted that a firm title has not been established.

I am dealing with the daily operations. I actually restructured the company when I started.

Ms. Gates goal it to streamline the business and remain high-level project oriented. She summed, It is both dealing with personnel and dealing with finances. ... The overall goal is streamlining processes, which she does by taking the best parts of things I have gleaned from Famous and [other industry work] and implementing them here.

Frontera has a procurement office in Clarksville, AR, and we also have an office in Florida in Pompano Beach. The company also has an office in Mexico near Vera Cruz in Isla. That is a grower office that we are going to bring on-line. It will handle exclusively pineapple to start with, Ms. Gates said. It is kind of our beta test before Frontera adds other products to the offices repertoire.



Her experience from the white-water rafting company with which she worked helped prepare Ms. Gates for her career. I handled other peoples' money since I was 15, she said. I did marketing before I knew what marketing was. Ms. Gates paid her own way through college, graduating without any debts.

As for being a relatively young member of the produce industry, Ms. Gates said, I think the thing that you have going for you is energy, which she said was especially valuable to her at Famous, where she worked on the road about 48 weeks of the year. I'm not that far out of college, and I like to stay up on technology, which is an increasingly important element of the produce industry. She said that younger people tend to be much more adaptive to that.

When not at work, Ms. Gates likes to do a number of outdoor activities, and I like to work out. I definitely go to the gym.

Now in Texas, I am actually going to get into ocean kayaking in the bays around South Padre Island off the coast of Texas.

While in college, she worked in the Army's Reserve Officers Training Corps office and took many ROTC classes such as mountaineering, map reading and outdoor survival. Those classes turned her on to climbing, which she did frequently in the Visalia, CA, area where she lived before moving to Texas for Frontera. Before I left [California], I was doing a lot of mountain biking. In college, I did a lot of climbing of all different types, she said. The ROTC courses were what whet her appetite for these activities. That was where she first strapped into a climbing harness and, while doing barrel rolls in a kayak in a pool, she thought, "Someday I should try ocean kayaking."