

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile Series

Velda Carter Hughes '74C

Owner and CEO

Hughes Agency, Greenville, SC

Professionalism. Graciousness. Leadership.

Velda Carter Hughes '74C is a successful CEO, career mentor, and mother. For the past 35 years, she's run one of the most recognized and sought-after public relations firms in the South. She's also mentored over 400 interns to-date, and isn't slowing down! Growing up in the small town of Tabor City during the Civil Rights movement, she is the daughter (and mentee) of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist W. Horace Carter. As an adult, Velda has blazed her own trails and built success through resiliency and determination. Yet, she remains gracious and humble for her life's blessings.

Small Town Values

Velda Carter is the daughter of Horace and Lucile Carter and the youngest of three children. Her oldest sibling, Linda, is seven years her senior, and Velda's brother, Rusty, is five years older. Shortly after Linda was born, Horace and Lucile moved the family to Tabor City. There, Horace started a small town weekly newspaper, *The Tabor City Tribune*. He ran the paper, was the editor, and wrote columns while Lucile handled advertising sales – all the while raising their children and keeping the family home.

"Ours was a close-knit family, and we grew up in a town of only about 1,800 people," Velda recalls. "We had two working parents who lead by example. It was truly an incredible childhood."

Very early on, after the paper's launch, Horace faced off with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in a two-year campaign of editorials. It was a dangerous time, but he stuck to his values and quickly became known as a "champion for justice" working hard to purge their community of violence and prejudice the KKK encouraged. The paper faced financial boycotts and vandalism, and the family even received death threats. But, Horace persevered and soon his editorials exposed numerous clansmen who were then sent to prison. For this, he and the *Tribune* were awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1952 (the first awarded to a weekly newspaper in the Pulitzer's history) and just two years before Velda was born.

"Throughout his life, my father wrote a column every week – even the week he died," she remembers. "In fact, he had a heart attack on a Tuesday and called in someone come to the hospital who could help him finish his last column, which they did on that Thursday night. Then, he died Friday morning. He didn't quit, even then."

Velda Carter Hughes is a lot like her dad. "My father was truly a mentor to me," she shares. "He always told me I could be anything I wanted to be – to do any job that any person, man or woman could do. He also consistently demonstrated his morals and values, that race nor gender should matter."

Today, when asked about retiring as CEO of her firm, it's clearly not on her radar. "I'll never retire. I love what I do. I also love helping young professionals looking to go into PR or marketing, and I enjoy fundraising for causes I care about."

But, before she became a CEO, she first came to Saint Mary's.

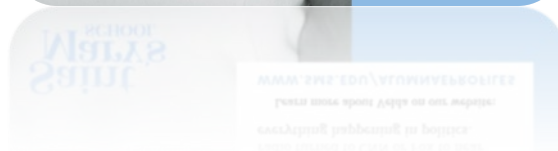
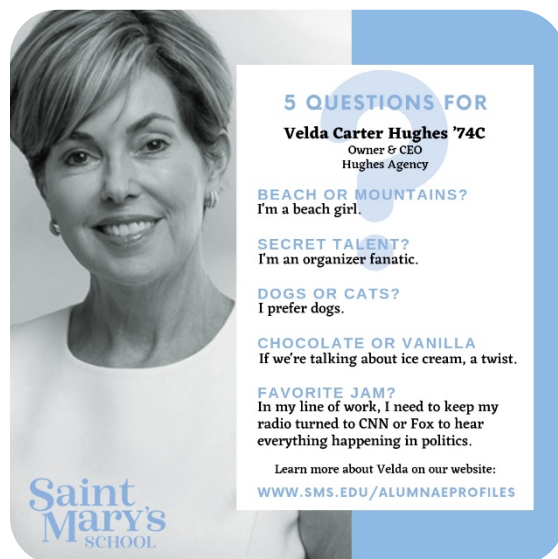
A Family Decision

Velda attended public school all 12 years and graduated in 1972. Then, the family discussed college.

"My dad and brother had both gone to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and I wanted to go there," she recalls. "However, my parents thought I should attend a women's junior college first, either Saint Mary's, Meredith, or Peace College."

While attending UNC-CH, Velda's brother Rusty had met and got to know several Saint Mary's girls. Hearing about it from them, he encouraged Velda to consider moving to Raleigh to attend the school. "It was basically a family decision that I attend Saint Mary's. After visiting, we made the decision and I moved in at 900 Hillsborough Street that fall."

Like many young women, the transition to the junior college wasn't easy – especially coming from a small town to the capital city. Though it was difficult, Velda persevered in her first year with support from her parents.



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"They knew I was struggling, but I didn't want to come home and give up. So, every Friday they'd drive to Raleigh and stay at a local hotel, so I could be with them. Their support meant everything to me, as did their love and guidance, which got me through my first year."

Building on that support, Velda's own resiliency and tenacity grew, making her more determined than ever to succeed. Like other young women who struggled at first, she also began building friendships with other women in her class. It would be the beginning of several lifelong friendships.

With a stronger footing in her senior year, Velda became class treasurer and was a "Belles" editor. She also focused on graduating and heading off to a four-year college. "There were lots of Saint Mary's girls who enrolled at UNC-Chapel Hill and we continued to develop these friendships while there."

Charting a Course for Success

At UNC-CH, Velda received a bachelor's degree in Journalism with a concentration in public relations and advertising. "Back then, there wasn't as much experience required when you applied for your first job, as there is today," she explains. "I was hired by the Greenville News out of college, but it was the only job I could get at that time."

Located in Greenville, SC – *the hometown of her future husband, Jackson Hughes* – Velda stayed at the newspaper for eight years, building her skills and her work experience, and developing that toughness she'd started while at Saint Mary's. Slowly, she moved up the ladder and combated a male-dominated world.

It was during these years that she and Jackson dated and decided they wanted to get married. That was also when her father levied a challenge to her. "He said, 'If you want me to pay for a wedding, then you'll need to prove you're self-sufficient.' He told me that if I could provide for myself for 18 months without help from either my mother or father, he'd pay."

Velda was determined to meet that challenge, and once again relied on her own strength and tenacity. "I did it, and they paid for the wedding," she explains and laughs.

As Velda and Jackson began their first years together, Velda was also moving up the ranks. "The next position I was offered was as Director of Public Relations for Multimedia Publications, which owned the Greenville News."

She took the position and began work as the head of the department. During this time, she and Jackson had welcomed three children and were now the parents of a two-and-a-half-year-old and newborn twins. "That's when I realized I wanted to start my own PR firm," she says. "I could work two to three days a week, with my own clients, and make my own schedule. It was the best thing for us and for me."

So, she did just that. Velda created Hughes Agency and specialized in public relations, branding, marketing, advertising, events, and today offers digital and experiential marketing, as well as media relations. Client by client, hire by hire, Velda grew her agency as she raised her children. Today, 35 years later, she has 26 staff – 25 of whom are women! And, she annually hires and trains 12-15 interns (approximately four each semester, winter, summer, and fall).

"We have messaging platforms that create awareness, increase attachment, and increase business," she explains. "We serve clients like TD Bank, which back in 1984 was called Carolina First Bank. At the time it was a little South Carolina Bank and I was offered the chance to plan their first grand opening. I did, and even the governor came!"

The bank has remained her client for over the past 35 years, in addition to new clients like SYNEX Corporation, the largest IT distribution company in the world, Clemson University, and the Greenville Triumph, a new professional soccer team in Greenville.

"I've had to rely on my strength all these years as a female CEO working with a majority of men who run these businesses and organizations," she says. "And, it's been satisfying in ways I couldn't imagine. I love it."

But, it's perhaps those more than 400 interns she's mentored over the past 35 years that give her the most satisfaction. "I've watched a shift over the past decade or more regarding college graduates and the expectation businesses and organizations have about work experience for entry-level positions. When I was a graduate, I didn't need any real experience for that first job. Today, graduates are expected to have real world experience, and that's where internships come in."

Velda shared that some colleges and universities with whom she's partnered with to offer internships require 400 hours for their students to even qualify for graduation. "How do you get experience? An internship, and these are NOT the 'get my coffee' kind of internship. Our interns work, learn, and produce. It's good for them, and great for us."

Reconnecting at Saint Mary's

Recently, Velda returned to Saint Mary's after decades of not attending her reunions because of raising

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her family, growing her business, and distance. "I still had some residual feelings of angst because of that first year, but I wanted to see the same women who'd become my friends and to celebrate our 45th alongside them."

At Reunion, she reconnected with Eugenia Owsley Fowler '74C who shared that her own daughter had graduated and was looking for a PR job. "I'm now working with them to see if there's a way I can help her."

For Velda, Reunion Weekend wasn't just about networking. It was also about rediscovering Saint Mary's and the women with whom she'd made lifetime connections. "Coming back to reunion, I was able to see that first year at Saint Mary's in a different light. The reunion was a great experience with old friends. It was lifechanging and great to see them and hear their stories."

Nurtured by her parents, mentored by her father, and the experiences throughout her life – from college to career – Velda says all of this gave her the self-confidence, tenacity, strength, and resiliency to be blessed with the life she has had. And, she's grateful.

"That's why it's ingrained as a part of my company – the concepts of professionalism, sophistication, graciousness and gratitude."

Today, Velda and Jackson have three adult children, four grandchildren, and give back to the community in which they live. Jackson also runs his own firm, Hughes Commercial Properties, and was recognized in 2008 as an Upstate Entrepreneur of the Year and in 2011 as Real Estate Person of the Year. Velda's sister Linda Carter Metzger is a successful real estate agent in the Lumberton, NC area, and brother Rusty runs their father's company, now called Atlantic Packaging. Recently, the company welcomed Rusty's son into the family business as a third-generation manager.

Velda Carter Hughes '74C truly embodies the spirit of Saint Mary's women who are intelligent, resilient, resourceful, passionate, and nurturing, and who are educated to make a difference in their communities and the world. We are grateful, and we think her father would be very proud to witness her success and the impact she's having on the world.

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