



Cork Tree Creative, Inc.
(WBE/DBE/Veteran-Owned/WOSB)

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Edwardsville, Illinois, in the Metro East, is experiencing significant growth in both population and business activity, according to economists, governments, and urban strategists specializing in tracking metropolitan areas and emerging cities. The Southern Illinois city, just 25 miles northeast of Downtown St. Louis, is viewed as a thriving community with strong potential for economic growth due to its strategic location near three major interstates, access to rail and river transportation, an accredited university, manufacturing facilities, new technology centers, ample land mass for infrastructure development, national sporting venues, and a business-friendly atmosphere.

Achieving success in the middle of this thriving community is Laura Reed, the co-owner of Cork Tree Creative, Inc., a public relations and brand management firm located on busy Main Street in downtown Edwardsville. "When I moved to Edwardsville, it was nothing but cornfields," Reed reminisces. "As it stands today, we are not the only public relations firm in town, but if I had to guess, we are the largest. We describe ourselves as brand managers. Our services include public relations, graphic design, online reputation management, search engine optimization, site design and development, advertising management for print and digital, and photography and videography," Reed states. Cork Tree Creative, Inc.'s client list includes a range of large to midsize companies, such as utilities, a national winery, and a national law firm.

Reed attributes a significant portion of her business success to acquiring her Women Business Enterprise (WBE) certification from the St. Louis Lambert International Airport Business Diversity Development department. However, she acknowledges that her co-owner, Jan Carpenter, played an invaluable role in assisting her with the intricate paperwork required for certification. "It took us several months to get through the paperwork, but we did not find it too daunting. We leverage our certifications to bring on more clients, and attend national conferences and networking sessions," Reed states. The company also holds certifications as a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE), Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB), and Veteran-Owned Small Business (VOSB).

While the company has maintained state and federal certifications for several years, it has yet to secure a contract with the airport. "We were on a team as a subcontractor, but our team was not selected. It was a learning process," Reed recalls. Undeterred, Reed and her co-owner continue to focus on expanding their business portfolio and are forging ahead.

Reed has a longstanding membership with the Leadership Council of Southwestern Illinois and actively collaborates with the organization to support its economic development initiatives. As a strategic move to identify opportunities for women-owned

businesses within the airport's consolidated terminal project, Reed joined Greater St. Louis Inc. "By leveraging our membership with Greater St. Louis Inc., we will stay updated on the airport's consolidated terminal project. This will give us a competitive advantage when bidding time arrives. We do a lot of work on the Illinois side, but the airport matters to so many people in the region, regardless of which side of the river you are on. Therefore, I think it would be nice to be a part of something that is important to everyone," Reed emphasized.

With ambitious plans for the company's future, Reed stresses the importance of achieving a healthy work-life balance. This principle was fundamental to her decision to establish the company alongside co-owner Carpenter. "We initially met at a public relations firm and later pursued our own freelance ventures from home while balancing the responsibilities of raising our children with supportive husbands," Reed explains.

Their natural synergy as entrepreneurs became evident, leading them to officially launch their PR firm in 2009. As best friends turned business partners, they operate the company on their own terms, extending flexibility to its 15 employees as well. Reed underscores the importance of providing employees with the same flexibility she and co-owner Carpenter valued in their early careers, enabling them to achieve an optimal work-life balance.

"We're firm believers in empowering our team to prioritize their well-being. We have a hybrid workplace model. Our employees enjoy the freedom to work remotely for two days each week and collaborate in the office for the remaining three. This is great for employees who are navigating their childcare responsibilities," says Reed.

In 2023, Cork Tree Creative, Inc., expanded its business by opening a location in the Cortex Innovative Community in the Central West End. "This is a change of scenery from our Edwardsville location. The Cortex building is particularly inspirational to foster our creativity and branding development."

Reed grew up in Vandalia, Illinois, observing her parents as they operated their businesses. Reflecting on her journey from these humble beginnings to serving in the Illinois National Guard throughout college and ultimately earning her Bachelor of Science degree from SIU Edwardsville in 1997, she realizes that she is now living her best life. The success of Cork Tree Creative, Inc., serves as a testament to her dedication and entrepreneurial spirit, earning numerous awards and recognitions as a successful woman-owned business.