

MARTHA STEWART EMPIRE BASED ON FAMILY MEMORIES

Domestic diva Martha Stewart used her family stories, real and imagined, to sell her magazine and start a company. Like most families, the business had good times and bad. The foundation was strong enough, however, that even a prison sentence couldn't make it crumble. Stewart took her hits, served her time, and came back better than ever. The mythic birth, downfall, and redemption of Stewart's empire was the subject of the opening keynote speech at last spring's "Myths of the American Family" conference, sponsored by the MARIAL Center.

"She displayed her family in . . . her magazine (*Martha Stewart Living*) and crafted a lifestyle to build a corporate empire," said Mary Ann Glynn, a professor of organization and management at Emory's Goizueta Business School, who has been studying Stewart for five years. "Examining the portrayal of family offers a transparent look at myth and ritual in American family life. From the first issue of the magazine, her family was portrayed."

Stewart wrote a nostalgic essay called "Remembering" in every issue of the magazine, from its beginning in winter 1990 until January 2002. Often, the focus was on a childhood memory that drew her parents into the spotlight. "Martha engaged in nostalgic remembering. She used her family members but fictionalized some of the accounts," Glynn said in her lecture, titled "My Family, My Firm" (online at www.marial.emory.edu). This approach helps her business, because it created an identity, a value system and a brand.

"It becomes real," said Glynn, also a member of Emory's sociology faculty. "It is tied to its founder in a very personal way. It creates a lifestyle." In the essays, Stewart draws on the past to plan her future, generating mythic stories in the process. Stewart tends to romanticize her family memories, which she often recounts in vivid detail. "We loved that kitchen and were so happy to sit at the steel-legged pink Formica table, playing poker or canasta, eating Mother's food, and listening to the radio while Mother ironed and I sewed and Dad tinkered with this and that," Stewart recalled in one essay.

Stewart writes about holiday traditions, special events, and even everyday routines such as cooking, cleaning, and gardening.

She tends to talk about her mother when the topic relates to tasks inside the house, such as cooking or cleaning. Her father is the subject when the topic is gardening, given that he taught her about that. She recalls, for instance, that she and her father—who is now deceased—planted peas every March, around St. Patrick's Day. "So I will do that again this year and I will remember my father when I do it," she says in her essay.

"Most of the talk is around her parents. There is very little mention of her siblings or extended family," said Glynn, adding that Stewart was the second of six children. In her essays, however, Stewart comes across almost as an only child who gets a lot of attention from her parents. This is the kind of social capital with which children can create rich futures.

In building her company, called Omnimedia (which includes books, magazines, and TV and radio programs), Stewart leveraged her family's social capital. She took what she learned from her parents and passed it on to readers.

"As CEO of the company, her leadership was born through wisdom of generations," said Glynn. "She learned at her mother's knee. She spent a lot of time in the kitchen and in the garden." These facets signal that her company is trustworthy, credible, and intimately linked to its founder and her reputation.

Each publication or program ritualizes American life and all its possibilities. The monthly magazine usually is tied to seasonal celebrations, with instructions on how to cook a turkey, trim a tree, or color eggs, for instance. Stewart doesn't neglect the "small r" rituals either, though. Articles deconstruct such everyday routines as food shopping and organizing. Her specialty books and magazines focus on such landmark events as weddings or the birth of a child.

Stewart's company is in the business of producing cultural goods and performances. Her stated purpose is to "take the simple

things of life and teach others how to do them, everyday things. My goal is to teach, inform, and inspire all of you in the preservation and extension of traditional family values and activities."

Given that Stewart's family and firm are the same, both are affected by her successes and stumbles. Glynn documents the changes during different eras, including the start-up, the switch from private to public, and the scandal that sent Stewart to prison and took her out of the CEO position.

Early on in the business, "there was a lot of chatter about family members," Glynn said, and this helped define what she was selling. During and after the stock scandal that sent her to prison, there were fewer mentions of her family. "When what I refer to as 'the troubles' hit, she pulls them back as if to protect this capital she has," Glynn said.

After she served her prison time, Stewart resurfaced as the face of the company, even though she will never again be its CEO. This



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redemption didn't surprise Glynn, who noted that "a lot of that keys into the sense of family, too." Many families have a member who screws up, "but you don't abandon them," Glynn said.

Love her or hate her, Stewart is intriguing. That's what keeps Glynn so interested. "She changes. She goes from being a magazine editor, to an empire builder, to a convicted felon, to a phoenix who rises from the ashes. We haven't seen a woman like this." ■