

## COVER STORY WOMEN OF EXCELLENCE

# Sustainability Through Beneficial Investment

*Interview with Larisa Miller, CEO Phonix Global LLC | By Darie Nani*

In ancient mythology, the Phoenix was a brilliantly-coloured bird of unimaginable beauty and splendour that would brighten the skies with hues of gold, red and purple. It's story is famous the world-over and the Phoenix itself is synonymous with rebirth, regeneration and the ability to rise from the ashes. So it is fitting that **Larisa Miller** chose to name her company **Phoenix Global**. As she says, in her interview with us below: '...if I make a mess of today, I forgive myself and start again with the sunrise. No one is going to build my dream, except me.' Phoenix Global specialises in both domestic and international business development, technology, project management, strategy and sustainability. They recognise the possibilities for growth in emergin economies and seek to foster opportunities and investment in these regions, allowing them to rise up and reach their own potential.

From her childhood growing up in the beautiful, agrarian landscapes of Pennsylvania, where she was encouraged to think critically and always think through a multiplicity of perspectives, Larisa Miller has always fostered a creative, entrepreneurial spirit. From her work with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture to her role working for the Royal Family in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, she has sought to bring this diversity of thought and variety of perspective to others through educational outreach projects, gender equality campaigns and prioritising technological innovation.

Larisa places a strong emphasis on paying attention to the world, to not letting opportunities, people or events pass us by. As entrepreneurs, it can often be easy for us to become blinkered or have a pinpoint focus on one particular area. Larisa believes that it is through paying attention that our best and most compelling ideas will come, that we will meet the most life-changing people and, ultimately, change the world for the better. Like the Phoenix, we all have the chance to change and morph and breathe new life into something that can seem lost. Like the Phoenix we all have the ability to dazzle and regenerate and grow with each iteration of ourselves. Like the Phoenix and, like Larisa Miller herself, we can all learn how to pay attention, to see the world around us in all of its infinite complexity and rise to meet the challenges with each new sunrise.

**Larisa, it is a pleasure to have you as the cover for this months edition of Sovereign. As a highly successful business owner, what can you tell us about your journey into entrepreneurship?**

While entrepreneurship isn't for everyone, it is undoubtedly the right path for me. When you work for someone else, you are merely the vehicle which carries their ideas and vision to fruition – sometimes with a successful conclusion, and sometimes not. No matter how good your idea is, at the end of the day, you are merely the worker bee, executing the mandate

of the Queen bee(s). For many years, I was a worker bee, and I look at those years as being the foundation – the skills-building and experience-building years – which gave me both the knowledge and courage to start my own firm. I have a wonderful business partner, and having a partner makes it a bit less daunting, as you have someone trusted to give you an alternate perspective, validate your decisions, and who has your back through the ebbs and flows of business growth. I find the challenge and excitement to be in the strategy-building, the generation of value, and the ability to rethink our client's business models and/or approaches, as well as to help facilitate investments that will generate stronger-than-average returns for our clients. I don't aspire to be better than everyone else. I aspire to be DIFFERENT from everyone else. I don't want to compete with other consulting companies, rather, I forge my own niche and business strategies, allowing me to offer value to clients that cannot be delivered in the same manner or with the same results, by competitors.

We all have unexpected events in life which force us to reevaluate our futures, or events that throw us into a cyclone of change, derailing our carefully blueprinted plans. Not everyone is meant to be an entrepreneur, however, as long as you live your life in a way that will allow you to look back when you are in our 80's with satisfaction rather than regret, then your life was lived in the way that was 'right' for you. For me, that means charging ahead into a daily abyss of uncertainty, sometimes having great success, and sometimes having monumental failures. But, if I make a mess of today, I forgive myself and start again with the sunrise. No one is going to build my dream, except me.

**What was your "A-ha" moment, when you knew it was time to forge your own path?**

Living in Abu Dhabi, and in my mid-40's, I found myself at a crossroads of impending change, both professionally and personally. With many doors to the past closing, I was faced with great uncertainty as to which path to follow to carry myself forward into a future where I could have more of a direct impact on the decision-making process, and where my vision and ideas would be respected and embraced. After a brief period of self-reflection and assessment, and with the support and encouragement of my business partner, I decided to start Phoenix Global. It would have been easy to take the comfortable route – accept a position in an established company where I would have a reliable paycheck, a set work week with a defined vacation allotment each year, and prescribed targets and responsibilities. But, with a great deal of courage (although, at times it felt more like insanity more than courage), I swallowed my fears, firmly resolved to pull up my bootstraps, and became an entrepreneur.

The question I am most often asked by individuals desiring to start their own business is how can you be sure you will be able to find the opportunities and clients necessary to grow and sustain a new business, and the answer I give them is the same answer I give my children about life in general...PAY ATTENTION. Put down your phones and look up. Destiny will walk right by those who are too busy taking selfies. And in my case, this belief has been proven time and time again. Meeting the right people at the right time – and being present enough to recognize the potential importance of these individuals and the influence they will have on my pathways, decisions, and the opportunities – has been both a gift and providence. When life does an about-face and you find yourself at a crossroads of uncertainty about where to go, what to do, and how to do it, remember that you have the power to write each and every scene in your life, and that the people and opportunities which can potentially have the greatest impact on this script will often appear when least expected. But only if you are paying attention.

**Can you tell us a bit more about your career beforehand?**

I started my career in the early 1990's with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture as the assistant





to the executive director of the Animal Health and Diagnostic Commission, and later as the assistant to the Deputy Secretary and Secretary of Agriculture. Growing up on a farm, the daughter of an influential agricultural lobbyist, agriculture has always been an important part of my life, and to this day, remains a key interest and focus for investments that Phoenix Global facilitates globally.

Following my time at the Department of Agriculture, I went on to work for Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, in his office of public policy. It was in this position that I learned how the many sectors of business intertwine to ensure the smooth operation of a complex society. Each cog – even from unrelated sectors – merges enabling all wheels to be in sync, enabling cohesive and orderly functionality, while providing unity between the public and private sectors. It was during my time with the Ridge administration that I truly became interested in the businesses of societal operations – finding ways to match meaningful investment projects with strategic investors, creating value for the investors and sector which they impact.

More recently, I worked for the Royal Family in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, responsible for business development, as well as serving as head of their non-profit foundation, focusing on building opportunities for women and youth in refugee camps and rural areas of Africa through education and literacy. Working in the UAE for a government and Royal Family where youth, tolerance, happiness and the importance of gender balance are prioritized, it is easy to see why the UAE – a country eight times smaller than the state of Texas, is one of the global leaders amongst nations, and I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to live and work there.

**So, Phoenix Global was born, tell us what are the main areas you are focusing on?**

Phoenix Global is a consulting, investment and development company, facilitating strategic investment in beneficial markets, focusing mainly on developing and emerging economies. Specializing in business acceleration and growth, at Phoenix Global, we introduce and guide our private sector clients and investors toward opportunities for expansion and profitability in new markets around the world.

Prioritizing technology, recognizing that technology will be the nucleus of all sectors moving into the future – agriculture, energy, transportation, finance, government, etc., we align with governmental leaders, strategic partners and global technology companies to build large-scale technology parks which include data centers/data management, cybersecurity, blockchain, IoT, agri-tech, fintech, artificial intelligence, e-Government, and more. An important aspect of our technology parks is education and working with the national university(s) in the host countries of our parks, we will bring satellite campuses of major worldwide universities to provide the necessary education and training for the local workforce. We are always looking for compelling tech partners and companies, from large brands, to SME's, micro-enterprises and entrepreneurs. The future of innovation is in the diversity of the concepts, ideas and inventions of companies and individuals around the world, and it is the union of the large companies with visionary small enterprises that makes our technology park strategy unique and compelling for investment. Our flagship technology park is in Skopje, North Macedonia, with additional parks planned for several additional countries, such as, Zambia, Slovenia and Ecuador. Presently, in tandem with our significant and influential global partners, and with major tech companies serving as anchor tenants, our Skopje Technology Park offers an attractive market for tech companies of all sizes to expand into a region of growth, value and innovation.

Additionally, by offering value-based consulting to our public and private sector clients, our expert team works with clients to derive and implement innovative strategies such as, improved operational efficiency, revitalization of business models, and the incorporation of organizational plans of sustainability – all of which lead to quantifiable growth and profitability, giving our clients competitive advantage in the marketplace.

**There is a strong emphasis on facilitating strategic investment in emerging economies. Why is it important to you that Phoenix Global really shines in this area?**

During my years in the Middle East, I spent considerable time visiting refugee camps in Jordan, Iraq and Yemen, as well as rural areas of Africa, where they struggle with abject energy poverty and the lack of access to quality education and employment. I began to conceptualise strategies that could be implemented in these countries to support nation-building through innovative growth and progressive development – and now, at Phoenix Global, a great deal of our business strategy is structured around introducing the compelling opportunities in these countries to global businesses and investors. Instead of seeing these struggling economies as countries filled with challenges, I see potential – economically and socially. We study the environment – the education system, the infrastructure, energy, agriculture and technological potential, analyzing the value and facilitating the process of bringing significant development partners to these nations. This was the vision and concept for a business that was planted in my mind, long before Phoenix Global began to sprout. And now, as the impact of Phoenix Global is felt in over 14 countries, across 4 continents, the personal reward that I receive from watching the economic, social and environmental metamorphosis in these nations, stemming from projects and development introduced by Phoenix Global, makes the challenges of being an entrepreneur worthwhile and gratifying.

**What would you say is the most profound impact Phoenix Global can make as a result?**

The most fragile nations – the ones struggling to overcome systemic problems that the developed nations take for granted, often offer the most outstanding investment potential. It is gratifying to facilitate investment that helps provide access to energy, improved infrastructure, cutting-edge agricultural techniques, the introduction of technological innovation – and the educational and entrepreneurial opportunities that accompany this growth potential, allowing developing and emerging nations to transform into a regional vanguards of progress and potential. This also paves the way for strong medium and long-term returns for investors, essentially making them stakeholders in the emergence and growth of these developing nations. We have a collective responsibility to work together to impact the triple bottom line – people, planet and profit, as we move into the transformation era of digitization, technology and sustainability. By strategizing future growth around the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, recognizing that we are all stewards of our planet, Phoenix Global has joined the Sustainable Development Goals Partnership Platform, professing our commitment to using these 17 goals, and the 169 targets contained within these goals, as a blueprint for development and responsible global stewardship. As governments, businesses, and investors look to grow their portfolios through sustainable impact, our team at Phoenix Global prioritizes the mandatory merger between sustainability and industry. It can't be us against each other, rather, it has to be all of us united against the problem.

**It is undeniable that you have a huge passion for the work Phoenix Global does and the projects you are undertaking. With that in mind, what would you say is the best thing about your job?**

I have to answer this question from two decidedly different angles – professionally and personally. The professional side of me – the CEO, is inspired and gratified when I see a company or government embrace my strategies, realizing measurable benefit to their efficiency, profitability or growth. Personally, the most rewarding aspect of my job is having the ability to serve as a role model to young women who are entering the job force or climbing the corporate ladder. Mentoring and motivating young women as they follow their individual career paths, I endeavor to encourage them to think of themselves simply as professionals – not as 'female' professionals. We are all one. We are all worthy of our opinions, perspectives and aspirations. I try to live by example, helping these young women to embrace their talents and skills without trying to be what others expect them to be.



LARISA AT A SYRIAN/IRAQI REFUGEE CAMP IN MOSUL, IRAQ.





LARISA WITH THE TRIBAL CHIEFS, AND HER FAMILY AND FRIENDS NEAR MUMBWA, ZAMBIA .

When I can inspire a young woman to have the confidence to live her dreams, writing HER story HER way; helping her to have the courage to take the proverbial road less travelled, sometimes defying the expectations of others; and, helping her to climb the corporate ladder with fearless determination and confidence, I have immense pride of accomplishment. When young women embrace their own individual style, not being afraid to show their personalities and emotions – empowering them to have the self-assurance to recognize that they are just as capable and worthy of success as their peers and colleagues, we move closer and closer to a corporate world where there is no delineation between men and women. It is not a competition between the sexes, and it is not a gender-based race to the top. As we adopt the Sustainable Development Goals as the foundation for the future, and as we embrace gender balance as a critical component of a sustainable business strategy, we will then own a future where the corporate culture is fully based on inclusion and unity.

Of course, we have to realise that no matter how much you enjoy and believe in what you do, there will always be challenges. What would you say has been your biggest so far?

As an entrepreneur and head of a global company, I know first-hand the struggle, the anxiety and the loneliness that entrepreneurs experience in their business journey. The pace can be gruelling, and some days there are far more noes than there are yeses. For entrepreneurs – regardless of what type of business you own, there are moments of self-doubt, and at times, an overwhelming desire to quit. But, if you set the grandest goal you have for yourself, no matter how difficult, far away, or unattainable it may be, and then set achievable benchmarks along the way to this grand goal, you will use those benchmarks as your measures of achievement. This way, you'll always see forward progress – you'll always realize success along the way to your goals, and you'll find that you are not as overwhelmed, discouraged, or tempted to wave the white flag of surrender. If you constantly have measurable, achievable accomplishments on your entrepreneurial journey, and if you resist the urge to quit when the challenges seem to outweigh the rewards, you'll be unstoppable.

I always like to say “Failure is the price of success”, I think it's something all entrepreneurs can understand and as you say, if you resist the urge to quit when it's though then undoubtedly rewards will follow. With that in mind, what have been the more satisfying moments of being an entrepreneur for you?

This may sound like a very contrived and predictable answer, but quite honestly, there have been many satisfying moments. If business could be defined simply by one or two satisfying moments, it wouldn't be very successful, and likely would not be a business that's 'in business' for long. Some of the satisfying moments for me with Phoenix Global were when I finally took the leap of faith and successfully registered the business; when my partner and I decided on our logo; our first client; each time we add a new country to our investment and development portfolio; and anytime we can make a quantifiable impact on youth, on businesses, on clients, and on nations.

It's interesting you mention the points right at the beginning, getting the businesses registered, getting the logo and branding sorted... It's always an existing first step of what we entrepreneurs hope will be a life long journey. I wonder, what would be your one piece of advice for someone just starting out?

Being an entrepreneur is the most challenging – and most rewarding undertaking you can take in your career-life. You'll have great successes, and not-so-great failures. Do not be afraid to fail. Failure is one of the necessary stepping-stones of life. Follow your endeavors through to the end – sometimes the end is bitter, and sometimes sweet, but each conclusion you reach will leave you stronger than you were at inception.

Follow your dreams, but do not be afraid to change those dreams. As you grow and mature, so will your hopes, goals and aspirations. Life is unpredictable, and ever changing. Be brave enough to change with it.

Be strong in your convictions, even if those convictions are contrary to popular opinion. Do not be afraid to swim against the current. The right path for you may not always be the popular path. Make a decision, believe in that decision, and follow it through to the end – regardless of the outcome. Be resolute and do not quit. Do not doubt yourself. YOU are the one person with whom you can have complete trust. Make mistakes. Mistakes are as much a part of life as successes, and they often teach you the largest, most important lessons.

Finally, always, always be kind.

You mention mistakes are as much a part of life as success is but what does success mean to you personally?

Depending on which aspect of life you are defining, the definition of success will be different. But the common denominator for both personal and professional success comes from the legacy you leave. In my opinion, success is achieved when you make a lasting impact on people, or on the environment. Endeavor to make a difference to just one person in your entire lifetime. If you can change just ONE person's life, you will have an ancillary impact on millions, as by changing the life of that one person, you will change the life for every one of their descendants for generations to come.

The ideal would be to commit to making a positive impact on as many people as possible throughout your lifetime, but if you one truly can change the life of just ONE person, your life will be a success. The 'things' you acquire – the size of the home you live in, the car you drive, the watch you wear, are all 'pats on the back' for your achievements, but these are not the measures which will define your legacy, as rarely will people remember what kind of watch you had. It's not the job promotions that you earn, the height of the corporate ladder you climb, or the clients you sign that will define your success in life. Yes, these are all signs of your abilities, skills and accomplishments, but success comes from selfless acts of kindness. This can be as simple as giving someone a hug, or taking the time to get to know their story, or it can be as magnanimous as giving a child without the means a chance at an education, or helping a woman to support her family by turning her skills into an entrepreneurial opportunity.

The more people you take the time to help, the more people who will be touched by your legacy, and your legacy is your success.

**Larisa, it has been a pleasure! Before we wrap this up, can you tell us, what is next for Phoenix Global and you personally?**

For Phoenix Global, our primary focus moving forward is to use our global exposure and experience to continue to help companies – domestically and internationally, to expand and develop their businesses in new markets, as well as to continue to work with clients to revitalize their business models to make them more profitable, competitive and compelling as we move into the vibrant and dynamic future of technology, sustainability and responsible competitiveness. It is very rewarding to be able to help companies go from merely surviving to thriving.

As for what is ahead for me personally, I am optimistic that good things lie ahead, and while it's difficult to foresee, the mystery is part of the excitement. My children, of whom I am so proud, are taking their steps into adulthood, and it is an honor for me to watch and mentor them as their futures take shape. As I enter a new phase of my life, I am blessed to be facing the future with the support of my family, good friends and trusted partners, and with this support, the future is a journey of awesome possibilities.