

BUSINESS BACKSTORY

You may know Julie Harkins as chief operating officer for Parady Financial Group, but you may not know she started as a teacher after college then worked for a well-known insurance company before taking a job in The Villages.



Bill Mitchell | Daily Sun

GETTING TO KNOW JULIE HARKINS

Lives In: Village of Collier at Atwood Bungalows

Moved From: Apple Valley, Minnesota

Moved When: 2024

Title: Chief operating officer

Business Name: Parady Financial Group

Business Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday; closed Saturday and Sunday

Business Website: paradyfinancial.com



Summer Jarro

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Julie Harkins took an unconventional path to a career in finance.

The Village of Collier at Atwood Bungalows resident got her degree in art education and worked in education as a teacher and administrator for a time.

After several years, she moved into finance. For almost a year now, she has been the chief operating officer of Parady Financial Group, a financial services firm in The Villages.

Harkins got her bachelor's degree in art education at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls then started working at a middle school in Hastings, Minnesota.

"I really loved education," she said. "When I was younger I excelled in school. I did post-secondary education my last two years of high school, so my junior and senior year I took college courses. I just enjoyed learning new things, then I got

a lot of intrinsic value teaching others."

She knew there were people who struggled with school and she wanted to be a teacher to help them.

"I could see learning didn't come naturally to some kids, and I thought sometimes those kids were the ones who enjoyed the extracurriculars," Harkins said. "So I went toward art."

She loved drawing, painting and glass art and loved learning different art mediums while in college.

When she taught middle school art in Minnesota she mainly focused on sculpture, ceramics, painting and drawing.

"It was the best year," she said. "I still have art from the kids in my class. It's kind of fun because I've connected or stayed connected with a handful of them now."

She enjoys seeing the impact she had on students.

"It was powerful," she said.

After leaving the school, Harkins started working for National American University. She stayed there for three years in the admissions department, helping people enroll, and later was promoted to director of admissions. While there, she enrolled in an online program to get her master's in business administration.

That degree helped her move on to work for the insurance company Allianz.

"I liked business, and math was always kind of a strong suit for me," Harkins said. "It seemed very transferable. I think the leadership or management came fairly natural to me. I thought to polish my skills I needed more of the business side versus the management side."

In 2013, she started working for Allianz in an entry-level position on the company's sales team. She eventually took on other roles in the more than

10 years she worked for the company.

Harkins worked as a senior representative as well as manager for the internal sales team and the external portion of the company, which allowed her to travel the country. She also worked as the director of sales for a time and as the divisional vice president.

She got to tap into some of her teaching experience when she worked in sales by teaching clients about the products and services that were available.

Harkins met Greg Parady, CEO of Parady Financial Group, while still working for Allianz because he was one of the company's top producers.

They stayed connected while Harkins worked for Allianz, and when she was looking for a new opportunity, she went to Parady.

She missed working closely with clients.

"The closer you get to the client, the more you feel the impact and kind of that giving back aspect of it," Harkins said. "Although I really enjoyed educating and teaching products and knowing that we were helping the consumer, now I get to sit across the table from them every day. I just feel it so much more, and it's quite emotional."

Harkins has enjoyed the last several months working at Parady. She has helped develop the firm's team and has been focused on client experience.

"I'm very passionate about leadership, but I think the culture is a huge thing," Harkins said. "We needed to recreate or identify what our identity is as Parady and the Parady team and what our culture is now. The foundation of that is client experience. That's what we do every day — make sure our clients can live a happy, confident, comfortable retirement."

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