

# Estero's 2019 Person of Influence

By Sharon Van Rite

## Margaret Antonier

A visionary with impeccable taste and an innate understanding of the consumer market describes Margaret Antonier, CEO and president of Estero's Miromar Development Corporation now celebrating 20 years since opening its first project in Southwest Florida. The awards Antonier has received during the years have proven she has the Midas touch. Miromar Lakes Beach & Golf Club has received multiple Gold Awards from the National Association of Home Builders recognizing the community and its beach clubhouse as the best in the US – dual honors no other community in the country has ever achieved. Miromar Outlets, celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2019, hosts 8 million annual visitors, is among TripAdvisor's top Southwest Florida attractions, and a perennial winner of opinion polls for best factory outlet and best shopping experience since inception.



Key to Antonier's success is her insistence on creating each project to the highest of standards – hers. "My objective isn't to build something quick but to create something of enduring beauty," she says. "It just requires more creativity. What we develop will have a lasting impact, so we put a lot of thought into everything we build."

Antonier is involved in every facet of Miromar Development's growing portfolio, which also includes Miromar Design Center and the new University Village Shops & Residences. From inception to completion, monumental to minute, Antonier personally selects every component – architects and builders, furniture and landscaping. She's aligned herself with the best, including land planner and landscape architect Taft Bradshaw, renowned for his work at both Ritz-Carlton properties in Naples, projects throughout Europe, Bal Harbour Shops and South Florida's most prestigious addresses. Antonier knew instinctively the moment she met him 22 years ago, he shared her unique vision. He started with Miromar Outlets and has been involved in all subsequent projects.

"Margaret is in a class by herself," says Bradshaw, now retired except for one client – Antonier. "At Miromar Lakes, she established a fresh new identity, creating something completely different for the marketplace. She's fastidious and very conscious of all design items. The image of Miromar Lakes was always important and that hasn't changed, other than it's better than planned."

Antonier's influence is felt in the grand and glamorous (she designed the entry gate doors of the Miromar Lakes Beach Clubhouse) to the obscure (the perfect pebbles for the club's courtyard). Her attention to every last detail has defined Miromar Development as a game changer, one boldly forging into uncharted territory. At Miromar Lakes, her vision predicated neighborhoods sculpted into a 700-acre freshwater lake, three miles of white-sand beach and amenity buildings pushed to the water's edge.

"All other developers in Lee County seem to be chasing the standards established by Margaret years ago," says Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann. "Her work has always defined the

word 'quality.'"

Antonier's unique style isn't influenced by traditional role models. Instead, hers is a coalescence of the roads she's traveled – globetrotting throughout Europe, attending French and British boarding schools in Israel before eventually landing in Montreal, Canada. Those experiences fostered a lifelong appreciation for architecture, interior design and the arts.

... And differences.

"Growing up, I was fortunate to experience a mix of cultures, languages and diverse people," Antonier says. "It opened my mind, literally, to a world of possibilities."

In the early days of Miromar Outlets and Miromar Lakes, Antonier traveled extensively to Italy and France, returning stateside with hundreds of photos that would become storyboards for her Florida

projects. She visited several Parisian palaces to find those courtyard pebbles and incorporated elements of her favorite fountains from Rome and Paris into the 13 fountains throughout Miromar Outlets. The landmark fountain at the entry to Miromar Lakes is an original Antonier design.

Estero's founding fathers will tell you Antonier put the village on the map. Although present-day out-of-towners are hard pressed to place Estero on a map of Florida, mention Miromar Outlets and they know exactly where Estero is. Antonier recognized Estero's potential more than 20 years ago after finding prime property for the outlets. "It was an excellent location situated between Naples and Fort Myers, visible from I-75 and so close to the airport," she says. "People love its many amenities – the playground, our new rock-climbing walls and the fountains with Pekin ducks, turtles and koi fish – but ultimately they love the stores."

Twenty years ago, Estero was an unincorporated hamlet of just 500; today it's an official municipality with a village government, a population over 33,000, and an outlet center triple its original size.

"Margaret was one of the early visionaries in Estero," says Dr. Wilson Bradshaw, who retired a year ago after a decade as President of Florida Gulf Coast University. "Margaret had a clear vision for what Estero could be. Not everyone saw that."

When Antonier was searching for property to build a master-planned community, she was awestruck by the large lakes displayed in a listing brochure. "I immediately sent in an offer and when I came to see the property in person 10 days later, I was ecstatic visualizing Miromar Lakes. The lake was incredible, and I imagined people boating, waterskiing and having fun," she says. "I saw a place where residents enjoy life to the fullest."

Ben Hill Griffin III, who had donated the land to build the new university (FGCU), agreed to sell Antonier the Miromar Lakes property after she shared her development ideas with him. "She was true to her word," he says. "Miromar Lakes is a quality development."

Former Lee County Commissioner John Albion credits Antonier for also defining and protecting the destiny of Ben Hill

Griffin Parkway and the university.

"Miromar Lakes affected the look, feel and value along Ben Hill Griffin," he says. "Margaret created a very, very desirable area in Lee County."

Just as she sees the world in multicolored dimension, Antonier believes supporting the community and its charitable organizations is a given. "It is very important to help the people around you," she says. "We have been part of Southwest Florida for 20 years and have been involved from the beginning."

Miromar Outlets has supported the Harry Chapin Food Bank and its Stuff a Bus program since 1999. Christmas marked the 18th year the shopping center purchased and delivered clothing,

shoes and wrapped toys to 400 children in Immokalee. Miromar Lakes hosted the Southwest Florida Wine & Food Fest for nine years, when it raised \$25 million, and Miromar Development has sponsored five homes to date through Habitat for Humanity. Miromar Outlets alone supports 40 charitable organizations.

There are many more organizations and events. Close to Antonier's heart is Dancing Classrooms, a national program proven to turn around the lives of at-risk fifth-grade students through ballroom dancing. She was captivated after seeing the documentary Mad Hot Ballroom.

"At our next marketing meeting, I gave each member of the team a copy of the documentary. I said, 'watch it tonight and we will talk tomorrow,'" she remembers. "The program is powerful. I knew we had to bring Dancing Classrooms here."

Antonier worked tirelessly to get the program added to the curriculum of specific Lee County Schools. Since she brought Dancing Classrooms to Florida and Lee County schools in 2008, 9,000 local students have participated. "It's a wonderful program," she says excitedly. "This changes the lives of under-privileged students. They do better in school; they learn respect and social skills. They become ladies and gentlemen."

Antonier's passion and enthusiasm for Dancing Classrooms has never wavered. "Margaret understood from the very beginning, that this was much more than teaching ballroom dancing," says Marshall Bower, president and CEO of The Foundation for Lee County Schools. "It was about helping to build and enrich the character of our greatest community asset – our children. Teachers, parents, and school administrators all report positive changes in the behaviors and attitudes of the fifth graders participating. I hear many success stories throughout the year."

Antonier believes most anything is possible. Like Miromar Lakes' white-sand beach which many said couldn't be done. During its evolution, she was insistent the beach remain accessible to all residents. "The water and the sand are what set Miromar Lakes apart from every other community," she says.

Antonier also created Miromar Design Center, a furniture shopping center dedicated entirely to home furnishings in a single building which, as expected, demonstrates her impeccable taste and brilliant marketing savvy. "What many people don't realize is that the entire center is open to the public," she says. "Consumers

will find everything they need for their complete household in a one-stop venue for all budgets. The Design Center is also available for seminars, tradeshows and special events."

When the shortage of apartments for FGCU students made headlines, Antonier and her team created University Village, a mixed-use shopping center and residential development that brought restaurants and businesses closer to neighboring communities. Phase I opened in August 2018 fully leased. With the completion of the second phase this summer, University Village will have 924 student residents. It also offers a 14,400-square-foot amenity filled clubhouse. A new south access road between University Village and FGCU, a collaboration between the two entities, is now open.

"We wouldn't have accomplished anything if we were not good partners," notes former FGCU President Dr. Wilson Bradshaw. "Margaret defined the character of both Miromar and FGCU."

"I'm a strong advocate of FGCU and its positive impact on Southwest Florida," Antonier adds. "The university is educating our future leaders and

employees. We employ student interns and FGCU graduates in our various projects."

Antonier has also been a significant but quiet supporter, Dr. Bradshaw notes. "Margaret is a great philanthropist. She's supported our food pantry and is a major sponsor of our annual President's Gala, our main fundraiser," he says. "Margaret is accomplished and a very smart businessperson."

Antonier never set out to win awards – 249 and counting – however gleaming trophies have practically taken over the Miromar Lakes sales gallery and the walls in the Miromar Outlets executive office display two decades of awards. The honors are a testament to Antonier's unique vision, her ability to see beyond the physical and create the future. Other awards acknowledge 20 years of philanthropic contributions to the community.

Like Estero, Miromar Development has grown from a handful of employees to over 250 today. Several have stood by Antonier's side since day one and many have been with the company well over 10 years.

Peering into the future Antonier sees continued growth for Estero and because of her unstoppable imagination there's definitely excitement in Miromar Development's future. Just don't expect her to play her cards until she's ready.

When asked about the difficulties of a woman succeeding in a man's world, Antonier is nonplussed. "I never thought that I couldn't do something because I'm a woman."

Meg Judge, founder of the Estero Chamber of Commerce, shared Antonier's vision and confidence; their common goals helped to not only create a strong friendship, but also a prophetic force in the evolution of Estero.

"I believe there would be no Estero without Meg Judge. She was amazing and believed in Estero's potential. She had the ability to get things done ... and she did it with a smile."

