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## Earnhardt races to top of bank leadership

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Kelley Earnhardt is surrounded by banking. There is the banking on the race track, banking needs involved in running two NASCAR teams for little brother Dale Earnhardt Jr. and banking as an industry in her role as the new chairman of the board at Mooresville-based Blue Harbor Bank.

Earnhardt, 38, has been on Blue Harbor's board since its founding in 2008. CEO Jim Marshall selected her because motorsports plays a key role in the local economy. As her promotion to board chairman makes clear, Earnhardt has met Marshall's expectations.

Her day job is going pretty well, too. She has led [JR Motorsports](#), her brother's racing operation, since it began in 2001. Kelley Earnhardt is co-owner and general manager. The team, also based in Mooresville, has grown to 85 employees fielding two Nationwide Series race teams.

In recent months, the company has also begun expanding a nightclub concept, Whisky River, that launched uptown two years ago. At the same time, Kelley Earnhardt is also helping steer her brother's production company. Divorced with two daughters, Earnhardt graduated from UNC Charlotte with a degree in 1995 in business administration with a concentration in production and inventory management. Early jobs included roles with a motorsports marketing company and an apparel company before going to work with her brother.

During a recent interview at JR Motorsports' 65,000-square-foot headquarters, Earnhardt discussed her new role at Blue Harbor, learning about the business of racing from her father, the late Dale Earnhardt, and the challenges ahead. Following are excerpts from that conversation, edited for clarity.

How did you become part of the board?

Jim (Marshall) had some contact with (a former marketing executive at JR Motorsports) and made the introduction to me. Jim was telling me about the startup of the bank and what was happening. I've worked since I was 16 — I've done all types of things. I was a retail store manager at the mall while I was in college. I've always had a really strong work ethic.

It was intriguing to me to be able to be on the other side of it because I've dealt with banks as a customer for a long time. Obviously, I like to be challenged and being on the board brings more experience, and I'm able to learn from other people in our community. I've already had a lot of business experience in my life, but I thought it was a unique challenge to learn a different side of the bank.

What did you know about the way a community bank operates?

We've always been a customer of a big bank. Never really worked with a community bank or a smaller bank, and when I got the opportunity to talk about Blue Harbor — it's so much more service-oriented and you're more than just a number. It's like running another business, that's my mentality.

This bank came in as the financial sector crashed. Obviously there is a big difference between community banks such as Blue Harbor and Bank of America. But what has the experience been like of having such an unusual time to enter the business?

We couldn't have come in at a better time. Because we were new, we weren't experiencing a lot of the problems that the big banks have. And at the same time we were on the cusp of that so when we were raising money to start the bank, things were still positive. Blue Harbor hasn't had to focus on a lot of the negativity. We've been able to focus on growing and a lot of positive things. (The bank loaned close to \$70 million in 2009 and has current assets of \$128 million.)

What is the business relationship like with your brother — what perspective does he bring?

We're all here as a direct result of his talent and his popularity. I have a strong hand in steering the ship, but he definitely has his input in the way he feels about the way he wants it to be done. We don't do anything that he's not comfortable doing.

How concerned are you about NASCAR's popularity declining — and what do you think of the response by the sport?

I'm concerned because sponsorship is different. It's made us work harder and think differently. At the end of the day, the whole economy thing has re-set things and some of that has been good. It's very unfortunate with the unemployment rate and the house foreclosures, but in other ways, in our sport, it's re-set salary levels that were out of control. You're paying a tire changer that worked a day a week \$100,000.

What's your management style?

When I came here in 2001, we had five employees. At the time (Dale Earnhardt Inc., her father's company) ran a lot of (Dale Jr.'s business interests). We started taking some control of that in 2001. We started growing with our own Nationwide team in 2006. And then we decided to leave DEI at the end of 2007. We've taken so much in-house: our website, our social media, our licensing, marketing, our PR. I'm here from 8:30 to 5:30 because I'm not comfortable coming in at noon and leaving at 2. The presence of the boss is important to the people that are working here. They're more productive, they're more determined and it's important because Dale Jr. is removed from it because he's traveling and racing. I've grown up with this company and the employees, it's more of a camaraderie.

What's it like to work in a field so dominated by men?

Sometimes it can be intimidating, but I'm a very confident person. I can convey that, and I think that gives me a level of respect from people. Being a female in a more male-dominated business, you have to go to a few more lengths. Little things, like handshakes — have a firm grip, I hate the goofy little handshake.

Are you past the point of your brother's fame overshadowing you in meetings?

I'm not afraid to say we're all here because of Dale. We're all here because of that, but we're all smart and intelligent. I've made my mark for myself and people respect me to be Kelley Earnhardt. I'm always going to be Dale Jr.'s sister — I'm OK with that. And we've always been Dale Earnhardt's kids, so we've all dealt with that.