

## Edna Morris, people person

Axum managing director's industry, people expertise powers new firm

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Edna Morris is a restaurant person, but she has a reputation for being a people person, too. The veteran executive of such brands as Hardee's, Quincy's Family Steakhouse and Red Lobster says the restaurant business is really in the business of people — listening to them, communicating with them and, ultimately, making them happy.

Over her long career in the foodservice industry, she has found there is a direct link between properly focused, trained and supported employees, and the profitability of a restaurant.

**CURRENT ROLE:** managing director, Axum Capital Partners; partner, CityRange; board member, Einstein Noah Restaurant Group, Tractor Supply Company

**NO. OF UNITS:** Axum is invested in Wild Wing Café, 32 units; personally invested in CityRange restaurants, two units in upstate South Carolina

**ANNUAL SALES:** Wild Wing Café, \$100 million; CityRange, \$5.5 million

**HOMETOWN:** Rutherfordton, N.C.

**EDUCATION:** B.A., psychology, University of South Carolina

**PERSONAL STATUS:** married

**HOBBIES:** tennis, wine, food, celebrating

These days, Morris is applying those and other valuable learnings and leadership skills to a new venture as managing director of Axum Capital Partners, a 2-year-old private equity firm that just completed the purchase of the 32-unit casual-dining Wild Wing Café chain — its first acquisition.

“Edna knows the restaurant business,” said Muhsin “Moose” Muhammad II, a former National Football League star and one of Morris’ partners in Charlotte, N.C.-based Axum. “She is a people person. One of the most important things I’ve learned from her is how important networking is.”

While approaching the restaurant business from the private equity angle may present a new and challenging path for her, Morris, who heads up Axum’s Limited Service Restaurant investments, said she couldn’t be happier with her new role.

“I get to shop for restaurants,” she said with genuine enthusiasm.

Morris met Muhammad in 2010. At the time, he had an idea for a private equity firm focusing on two specific areas of investment — limited-service and casual-dining restaurants, and educational services.

The plan was to invest in healthy companies that were in a position to use their capital to move up to the next level, and in restaurants and educational services they saw as recession-resilient businesses that met basic needs.

Morris and Muhammad co-founded the company that year with Raymond Groth, the former head of mergers and acquisitions at First Union/Wachovia Securities, now Wells Fargo; and Denis Ackah-Yensu, who was formerly with McColl Partners and Citigroup.



As a part of the emerging firm, Morris saw an opportunity that would enable her to use the broad palette of skills she had developed over the last 30 years, while also being involved in multiple concepts at the same time.

Wild Wing Café, Axum's first acquisition, generated about \$100 million in sales in 2011, and is a concept that Morris clearly is passionate about.

“You can't really be sad when you are eating wings and drinking beer,” she said. “I think it's a strong category, and all the people getting involved in it prove that there is an appetite for these restaurants.”

Morris currently is serving as the interim chief executive at Wild Wing Café, and admittedly loves being at the helm of a restaurant company.

“I love getting people excited about a common goal,” she said, noting that the CEO position is only temporary, and that her focus is on her work at Axum — which is fortunate for Muhammad, who finds her experience and expertise to be a critical asset to the firm.

“Most private equity firms hire advisors to provide a point of view on a potential investment, but their interests are not aligned because advisors typically don't have skin in the game,” Muhammad said. “Edna is a partner. She provides realistic assumptions for our financial models based on her experience as an operator.”

While the company is planning to purchase other brands, Morris said it was premature to discuss future plans.

In the meantime, she said: “I'm having a ball. I like the challenge of different settings, and this allows me to have my heart, brain and hands in variety of concepts. I get a lot of satisfaction from that.”

It is this attitude and an abiding affection for restaurants that she has carried with her throughout her career.

A psychology major at the University of South Carolina, Morris didn't have any plans to join the restaurant industry until a circumstance of geography helped point her in that direction. Living in eastern North Carolina, she took a job in the human resources department at the corporate office of

Hardee's Food Systems, one of the largest employers in the area. While at Hardee's, she worked to learn the business from every perspective, eventually rising to the post of senior vice president of human resources.

That experience helped her decide that foodservice was the industry for her.

"I loved the immediate feedback you got from customers," Morris said. "I loved that guaranteeing quality for customers in restaurants is very dependent on people."

Morris spent the next 15 years learning the business as head of human resources at Hardee's, and later for Advantica Restaurant Group Inc., a Spartanburg, S.C.- based company that owned nine restaurant concepts. It was her leadership skill and inherent ability to connect with people that led to her becoming president of Quincy's Family Steakhouse, a casual-dining concept owned by Advantica.

The move also proved to be an inspiration to her female colleagues, as well as anyone who aspired to a career in foodservice.

"If you are ever questioning whether this is an industry for [you], you meet Edna and say, 'I want to surround myself with people like that,'" said Carin Stutz, chief executive of Così Inc., a fast-casual company for which Morris eventually would serve as a board member.

Stutz met Morris — whom she considers to be both a trusted friend and mentor — at the Women's Foodservice Forum in 1995, and has relied on her for guidance and inspiration ever since.

"I think she's fearless," Stutz said. "She has an intellectual curiosity about her. She knows what she doesn't know, and then she learns it. She really is one of the main pioneers for women leaders in the restaurant industry."

Morris is a founding member and a longtime advocate of the Women's Foodservice Forum. However, while she acknowledges that there certainly have been barriers during her career in a traditionally male-dominated industry, she says she has never let them define either her successes or her failures.

"Being a woman is the last reason I'll give as for why something did or didn't happen," Morris said. "It's more about looking at what I could have done differently or better."

After serving as president at Quincy's, Morris was named president of Darden Restaurants' Red Lobster brand, and later, president of Blue Coral Seafood & Spirits, a high-end seafood startup owned by multiconcept operator OSI Restaurant Partners and multichain restaurant founder Paul Fleming.

In 2004 she was tapped to turn around the troubled James Beard Foundation, where she helped to restore transparency and rebuild leadership after one of its executives had been found guilty of fraud and misuse of funds.

She also became a partner in Range Restaurant Group, which owns two CityRange restaurants in Spartanburg and Greenville, S.C.

During her career, Morris has served on several boards, including Cosi, Tractor Supply Company and Einstein Noah Restaurant Group. She said she welcomes these opportunities to work with new people and effect change in the industry she's devoted her life to — and one whose future she remains staunchly optimistic about.

“If we were talking in 2010 or 2009, I might not be so cheery,” she said. “But from the numbers I’m seeing from guest counts, transactions and sales, it’s a great time to be in the restaurant business.

“But then again, the last 30 years have been a great time to be in the restaurant business,” she said.