

Kelley Earnhardt

TAKING NASCAR BY STORM

TEXT BY **SHERRI K. OOSTERHOUSE**
PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY **JR MOTORSPORTS**

Now that the NASCAR Hall of Fame has the checkered flag, it's only fitting that there should be an Earnhardt in this issue of *Charlotte Living*. Sure, everybody knows Dale Jr., but we wanted to introduce you to the woman in his life.

She's been there for him since he was born—through the death of their famous father to devising the exit strategy when he left the family namesake to race for Hendrick Motorsports. Big sister, Kelley Earnhardt, is Dale Junior's go-to-girl. Whether JRM sign's the most popular female driver to the sport, or opens a bar in the Epicentre, Kelley is behind the scenes making it happen. She's focused, driven, and humbly owning her NASCAR legacy.

CL: Talk about your path to becoming Vice President, General Manager and co-owner at JRM and your role here . . .

KE: After my dad died in 2001, I felt like I needed a change and left Action Motor Sports (now Motorsports Authentics), where I was an account manager. I was struggling with people exploiting my dad and his death, souvenir sales, and all of that. So I asked Dale if he needed help managing his business interests. I started with paying bills, insurance, and managing investments—all out of a small office at DEI.

In 2003 we renegotiated his contract, and I started to get more engaged—in his website, fan club and other businesses. In 2005 we had the opportunity to go to Nationwide Racing for the 2006 season, and we put a team together in four months. Hey, we had a sponsor approach us, and you just don't turn that away.

In 2007 when we knew we were leaving DEI for Hendrick Motorsports, I took over licensing, marketing, sponsorships, websites . . . everything. Now as part

owner of JRM, I really oversee everything, from contracts to business strategies, basically all high-level decisions.

CL: How is it working with your brother?

KE: We've been close all our lives. We had to be, we had to lean on each other. Dale and I have such a strong bond and trust, so we don't need to separate business



from our personal lives—it all just blends together and that's O.K.

Over time, he's come to trust me more and more on business decisions because I've done some big things that have worked out. I have a track record now, and we have a lot of history together. Most importantly, we have a mutual investment in the same game. If we didn't have the childhood relationship that we did, things may be different.

CL: Did you grow even closer after your dad died?

KE: Most definitely. My dad was always Dale Jr.'s go-to person—if it was good enough for my dad, it was good enough for him. Once he was gone, we forged a stronger bond.

CL: How do you describe your brand?

KE: First of all, Dale hates to be called a brand (laughing).

But seriously, the best description is "authentic." You always get the real deal. He's humble—he appreciates where he came from and where he's going. And I think people appreciate and respect him for it.

CL: How has the business of running a motorsports and management company adapted to the economy?

KE: Well first of all, we used to have people knocking on doors, and we had to turn them away. Now we are knocking on doors. We are tying in a lot more assets and packaging sponsorships differently.

It used to be the traveling billboard—the car with their logo—was good enough. Now, there is social networking and all these other things to be involved with, and I can't quite tie a revenue center to it. Also, we had to cut costs, and lay off some people in

2008. We currently employ about 90 people, before that we had about 120.

CL: Growing up in a NASCAR family, what one thing did you learn from your dad that you can attribute to your success?

KE: I think it would be "to take care of people." On the business side it's all about people and starts with a mutual respect for that person. My dad led by

example—he would be in the office at 6 am greeting people as they walked in the door at DEI.

CL: Is it easy or more difficult when you have the name Earnhardt in this business?

KE: I would say it's more of an advantage than a disadvantage. Because of my family legacy, I can create relationships and build on them. It's only a disadvantage when people don't know you and want to stereotype you. When I was in school, people thought that Dale and I had everything—and we did have nice cars, but we had to work for everything we had.

Recently when Dale and I did the Nationwide Insurance TV commercial together, he asked—"are you sure you want to do this?" I usually prefer to be behind the scenes.

CL: An ESPN reporter recently named you the third most powerful woman in NASCAR. Do you agree?

KE: I am very humbled by it. I know there are so many women out there who want to be recognized for being good at their jobs.

I think it's really encouraging for NASCAR. Women are making great strides in this business and being recognized as a powerful force. But I have to be honest with myself, I'm here because Dale Jr. is where he's at, but I also know I'm here because of a lot of hard work.

CL: Talk about your role in recruiting Danica Patrick to the JRM team?

KE: When they first came to us we said "no." We had Brad Keselowski. Then we heard that she was having conversations with Tony Stewart, which ended in a sponsor conflict. So they approached us again, and we said "yes," but I did have a conversation with Danica first, because I wanted to hear from her—what are her expectations, why do you want to race stock cars?

I look at it as an opportunity for us—new sponsorship opportunities focused on the purchasing power of women. In NASCAR, it's 40-60—women to men.

CL: Is there an off-season for you? And how do you spend it?

KE: Really, it's the summertime. We work hard in the fall to get set for the season, and then work hard all through the race season.

My girls are 9 and 4 years-old now. We like to spend time around the pool and just hanging out. I also like to scrapbook—it allows me to use my creativity in a different way.

CL: With the opening of the NASCAR Hall of Fame, what would your dad have thought about being in the first class of inductees?

KE: Dad would be very humbled by it. He worked hard and sacrificed a lot with his family and kids—and a lot of relationships along the way. He would be proud and honored. But he would also find a way to give back to the fans—something fun.

CL: Will you attend the opening?

KE: We will attend the induction ceremony on May 20th. I can't wait to get down there and walk through it. As new fans come into the sport, they can learn about the history of NASCAR—you can't explain that on a Sunday race day cast.

I also can't wait to take my kids. My first daughter was only 5 months old when my dad died.

CL: What do you think it means to Charlotte to have the NASCAR Hall of Fame?

KE: It's a natural fit, and another attraction for fans to visit when they come to town for the races. It would be weird to have it anywhere else—like it's strange that there's a track in California. I couldn't imagine it being anywhere else. *

A Timeless Experience

Since 1892, generations of North Carolinians have made their seasonal escape to The Escola Lodge.

Of course it's the soul of the High Country. But it's also the challenge of a Donald Ross original, cuisine as exceptional as the conversation, and service of incomparable caliber.

Discover an experience that's exclusively Escola.

The Escola Lodge
at Linville Golf Club
175 LINVILLE AVENUE
LINVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA 28146
www.escolalodge.com • 1-800-747-1177

Call today for reservations.