



## BONITA GOOCH A community VOICE

WHEN THE SMALL-FRAMED BONITA GOOCH walks into the room, you might be misled by her casual jeans and soft pink sweater, her wide smile, warm eyes and laid-back greeting. It's only when she sits down and starts talking business – and shares her passion for the African-American community in Wichita – that you recognize her determination and drive.

Photography: Gavin Peters  
Make-up: Christy Peters  
Hair: Ernestine Curtis of The Chic  
Location: Johnson's Garden Center

You know you're in the presence of someone who is making a difference.

Bonita Gooch is focused on our community, and she is a woman with a mission. Her mission begins with her weekly newspaper, *The Community Voice*. It is a little unusual and off the beaten journalistic path. And that's just the way she wants it.

"We're different. We focus on giving the African-American community a voice," said Gooch. "Now what we're doing is to fine tune that voice to focus on the stories of the community in Northeast Wichita – as related to issues and accomplishments."

No crime stories. No police report. It's all about community.

"I'm about advocacy, education. About the unity of my community," she said, eyes brimming with unspoken pride. "What pleases me most is what we have done and how we have gained a great deal of respect from the community, and that

through it all I've retained my integrity. That's hard to do in business."

She likened her urban paper to a small rural newspaper, such as *The Ark Valley News*.

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*"We're a like a hometown newspaper.  
Very much focused on the activities  
of the community."*

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And we're doing it, because nobody else is doing it," she said.

And they are doing it well. Currently circulation for *The Community Voice* of Wichita is a healthy 10,000. Expect that number to rise as Gooch implements new ideas and strategies to better connect with the community. Despite receiving numerous awards for the newspaper she loves, and for her own writing abilities, Gooch said her biggest rewards are delivered very simply.

"Oh it's such a reward when people walk up to you and tell you that you're doing a good job,"

she said, laughing. "When that happens you really appreciate that they have noticed your efforts. Just hearing the people you are working hard for – hearing them say thanks means more than any award."

Nonetheless, Gooch and *The Community Voice* have picked up plenty of honors over the years – and several came right off the bat. The paper picked up the U.S. Small Business Administration's Media Advocate Award in 1997, while in 1998 it earned two awards from the Kansas Press Association, one for overall excellence and the other to Gooch herself for in-depth writing.

Not a bad start.

Especially for Gooch who, despite her journalism degree from the University of Kansas, really had no plans to become a writer and shows little interest in her accolades.

In 1996, Gooch was helping run the family's Xerox agency when her father, former Kansas

state senator U.L. "Rip" Gooch, decided they should buy the newspaper and talked her into taking over. *The Community Voice* was a fledgling, year-old publication when Gooch took the helm, and she quickly directed a shift to create an award-winning resource for our community.

The paper has been free for readers to pick up at 100 different locations around town and will continue to be complimentary in the future. However, last fall Gooch and her team decided to take the newspaper one step further – by adding paid subscribers. But, true to form for Gooch and her paper, these paid subscribers don't exactly fit the norm.

"They are *The Community Voice* family members," said Gooch, grinning. "We analyzed it and looked at ways we could beef up our circulation. And we decided that we had such a loyal community – we decided to reward them for their support."

That reward is their subscription and having the paper mailed to their home. Paid subscribers also now enjoy benefits around town, such as special movies, discounts at shops and more. In fact, the subscription benefits channel the readers right back into the community and the businesses that support each other.

Sounds like those with paid subscriptions might be helping more than just the bottom line of the newspaper. And Gooch wouldn't have it any other way.

"Well, I'm pleased to be taking the paper in this direction, the right direction," said Gooch. "We're on the right track, of course we'd love to have more advertisers, but we just want our community to be involved and be proud of it. I want them to be able to pay for their subscription by the end of the first quarter, to give them a little better price on their pizza."

Gooch is also on a mission to turn up the volume on the other publications her company, TVC Publishing, Inc. produces, including *The Big Voice* and *Tanker Times* (formerly the McConnell Air Force Base newspaper known as *Contrails*). In addition, her team also publishes specialty supplements such as *Feeling Fine*, and sponsors the NEW Awards and other events. Innovations include *The Big Voice* CD compilation and the revamping of the former *Contrails* with a goal of making it exciting and vibrant.

Clearly, her passion for people and community extends to cover nearly the entire city.

"The biggest thing my father ever told me was to 'strive for excellence,'" she said. "I don't care what you do, if you're the dogcatcher or the trash man – then be the best dogcatcher you

can be. And I've tried to teach my daughter 'whatever you do, enjoy it.'"

Gooch has become a role model for the youth in our community, some of whom help out at the newspaper and "always come back" to visit after they've left to continue their education and adult lives. She's especially a role model for her daughter, 13-year-old Lauren, who is following in her mother's footsteps as the current editor of the Brooks Middle School *Paw Print* newspaper. In-between their busy schedule of school, work, attending community events and a busy slate of Lauren's tennis playing – the pair is just that, a matched pair.

"Oh, when she was little she was always by my side," said Gooch, a spark radiating from her warm dark eyes. "Everyone knew her. She'd come with me to things, slept many nights on the sofa at the office. I just wish I could spend more time with her."

To that end, the energetic woman has dropped off several boards around town, trying to garner a bit more free time for talks and tennis matches.

"There's time for that later, and right now I think I can give through the paper," said Gooch. "I just like feeling like I'm making a difference, that I'm making an impact. Really, I was just a busybody. I was into everything and everyone's business. I never really thought of making it a career when I first started."

Her journey from busybody to community leader via her "small town" newspaper has been a happy one.

"Papers come and go, much less small businesses," she said. "And I've been at it for 10 years. That's not bad, not bad at all."

"You know, I'm pretty happy everyday. There is a joy of life when you get up everyday just grateful, thankful, happy and healthy – in the end, it's the small things that really matter." 🍀

–LISA HENSHALL

