

## Trailblazers of Paradise

*Their forefather may have established Collier County, but the Sproul women, led by tenacious matriarch, Judy Sproul, forge their own path.*

One of Judy Sproul's happiest memories was on a lake in Hallstatt, Austria, in 1987 with her three daughters—Katie, Julie and Jennifer. Julie had just graduated from high school. Katie had already graduated from Cornell University. And Jennifer, the youngest, was still at Naples High. The four women remember the day as Disney-esque (that's fitting, considering Hallstatt would later be the model for Disney's *Frozen*). A clear blue sky stretched overhead as they rowed a boat across the lake. They sang "I've Had the Time of My Life" from *Dirty Dancing*—out that summer—and occasionally stilled their paddles to gaze at the passing swans.

Judy and her three daughters were a strong unit. They needed to be. They carried an important legacy on their shoulders, one that had shaped Collier County for a hundred years. Soon, it would be their turn to take up the mantle. But not quite yet. First, they had a lake to traverse, swans to admire and songs to sing in this tiny corner of Austria where no one knew the power of the Collier name.





Juliet “Judy” Sproul, née Collier, is the granddaughter of Barron Collier (you know, the man who bought about a million acres of Lee County to create Collier; established the county seat in Everglades City; bankrolled the completion of Tamiami Trail; and launched the first local newspaper, school and bus line). Judy grew up on Florida’s east coast before moving to Connecticut,

where she married her husband, Bud. They had three daughters—first Katie, six years later, Julie, and 20 months after that, Jennifer.

The youngest was still a baby when Bud died suddenly of heart failure in 1972. Judy was 31. “I spent one winter in Connecticut by myself, changing diapers and going, ‘Ugh.’ That’s when I decided I was moving back to Florida,”

Judy tells me recently when I meet with her and her daughters inside their company headquarters in Naples. “The move was good for everybody,” she says. “We finally warmed up.”

Once here, Judy quickly got involved in the community. She started volunteering and meeting people. Katie likes to tell this story about her mother: Judy had volunteered to help with the girls’ soccer

Judy returned to her native Naples in the 1970s with three young daughters in tow. With no former experience or a college degree, she built the Halstatt investment firm in 1992. Her first major project: the game-changing gated community Grey Oaks.



Courtesy Grey Oaks Country Club (right)



Julie, who lives in New York, sits on Halstatt's board and chairs the Family Board. "My role has been around family governance and keeping communication systems going," she says. Or, as Judy notes: "She's trying to keep us all in line."

team, and one day she got a call from the coordinator.

"I'm sending you a list of names," the woman on the phone said.

"Oh?" Judy asked. "Am I the telephone chairman?"

The woman on the phone laughed politely. "No, you're the new coach."

Judy took it in stride, even when one of the team fathers gave her the once-over. "You want to be the coach?" he said. "You've never even played soccer."

It's true, Judy hadn't. But she harnessed her whip-smart intellect and gritty determination and studied the ins and outs of the sport. By the end of the season, her team had won the championship. "That's the kind of spirit Mom has inside her," Katie says. "It runs in the family."

Even with her growing involvement in the community, Judy kept one thing to herself: her maiden name. "I'm proud of being a Collier," she says. "I just enjoy doing things on my own."

But when her father, Barron Collier Jr., died in 1976, that was the end of her secret. Judy inherited a large piece of undeveloped land at the corner of Golden Gate Parkway and Airport-Pulling Road



Katie, Judy's eldest, is a force in Naples, shepherding her mother's legacy as the CEO of Halstatt. "Mom instilled in us the spirit that we got so much from Collier County; it's our responsibility to give back," she says.

in a moment that would transform her life and change the face of Naples forever.

Judy had big ambitions for her property. She'd come from two generations of developers, and gated golf communities were spreading like wildfire in Southwest Florida. So, Judy decided to build her own and make it the finest in the region. "I didn't want to do just another country club," she says. "This was land that had been in my family for years and years and years. I wanted to build something my daughters and I could be proud of."

Though Judy had no construction or business experience or even a college

degree, she had fierce inner fortitude and an unshakable belief in herself. Still, her advisors weren't convinced. "You've got enough already," they told her. "You don't need to take on this project." She rolls her eyes as if to say, "Can you believe those guys?" "They basically patted me on the head and said, 'Go play,'" Judy tells me.

Thankfully for Naples, Judy ignored them. "My father had believed women had no place in business," she says. "But I'm a bit stubborn." She surrounded herself with a strong team and set out to build Grey Oaks Country Club, transforming her parcel into a cornerstone in Naples. She

Jennifer Sullivan, the youngest sister, runs the family's Halstatt Charitable Foundation.



was intimately involved in the process, down to choosing the silverware in the clubhouse. Since its inception, Grey Oaks set the standard for gated-community living, adding features like outdoor dining to the clubhouse, which was unheard of at the time. “We referred to Grey Oaks as mom’s fourth child,” Katie says. Judy just shrugs: “I had a hand in everything.”

In the process, Judy had to combine the two trusts she’d inherited—one with the land and one with the capital—and her new

endeavor needed a name. For a long time, she was stumped on what to call it. Then, someone suggested she name it after a fond memory. The answer came to her immediately: Halstatt, for the picture-perfect town with the beautiful lake where she’d once rowed with her daughters.

Sitting with this pioneering Naples family inside the contemporary Halstatt offices, with picture windows that overlook graceful oaks, I’m struck by their energy. These women are captains of industry, and

Mom is the major. “We aspire to be like her in many ways,” Katie says. To which Judy adds: “And to be your own individual.”

In addition to developing Grey Oaks and LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort, Judy was instrumental in founding the Community School of Naples and Naples Botanical Garden. She was named a Junior Achievement Business Hall of Fame Laureate in 2004, a Naples Daily News Outstanding Citizen of the Year in 2003 and the Life Achievement Award

recipient from Edison College in 2006. The trio of Judy, Katie and Jennifer were named Hodges University's Humanitarians of the Year in 2010 and Women of Initiative by the Women's Foundation of Collier County in 2022.

Though warm and gracious, Judy's clearly used to speaking her mind. "There's a saying about me," she says. "If you ever want to know how it is, just ask Judy." At 83, she still wants to be kept apprised of all the goings-on at Halstatt, but she knows she has an ace team in charge. "I've got three people here who

are really competent," she says, pointing to her daughters.

Katie, Halstatt's CEO, sits across the table from Judy, steady and confident as if conducting a board room. As she got more involved in the company's financials, Katie decided to pursue an MBA from the Yale School of Management ("Thank goodness," Judy notes). Jennifer Sullivan, the youngest, sits to Judy's right. She's the executive director of the Halstatt Charitable Foundation. In true Naples fashion, philanthropy is a big part of what they do (in the wake of

Hurricane Ian, the foundation donated \$75,000 to relief efforts). Beside her, at the end of the table, sits Julie, a board member of Halstatt and chair of the Family Board. She's focused and organized, leaning in with her laptop open on the table. "Julie is trying to keep us all in line," Judy says. She looks at her daughter and smiles wryly, "Which is not an easy job."

Today, all four look toward the future. "Until now, Mom has been the glue and driving force behind everything," Julie tells me. "We're starting



Courtesy Grey Oaks Country Club

Grey Oaks set the standard for understated elegance when Judy opened it 30 years ago. Honoring her mark, the city declared March 4 as Judy Sproul Day during the community's 20th-anniversary party in 2013.

to ask how the next generation can develop their own glue."

The answer? Several years ago, three generations of Sprouls set off on an African safari to cement lifetime memories. There was a moment during sunset on the Okavango Delta, when their phones had stopped working and the day-to-day distractions fell away. From the youngest to the oldest, they gazed at the setting sun, held together in awe. "Family comes first" is one of Judy's favorite maxims. As the next generation comes into its own, family remains at the heart of it all. ■