

Elise Vasquez-Warner oversees Walmart's stores in South Florida

BY INA PAIVA CORDLE - ICORDLE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

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Elise Vasquez-Warner, vice president and regional general manager for Walmart in South Florida, in her Doral office. (Her territory extends from Tampa-St. Petersburg to Florida City.) C.W. GRIFFITH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Elise Vasquez-Warner essentially oversees an empire: 135 Walmart stores from Florida City to Tampa Bay.

That domain, with 40,000 employees, keeps growing, as Walmart targets South Florida for expansion. In fact, the company's first store in the city of Miami, a Neighborhood Market in Flagami, just opened on Wednesday. And Florida ranks as the Bentonville, Arkansas-based behemoth's second largest state, after Texas.

Vasquez-Warner has risen up the ranks at Walmart, starting in 1995 as an hourly associate in her home state of California. In 2011, she was promoted to vice president and regional general manager of South Florida, after serving in the same role for Alabama and the Florida Panhandle.

We sat down with Vasquez-Warner at Walmart's regional offices in Doral to learn about the company's operations and her background, and then emailed her these questions. Here are her responses:

Q. Tell us about your role at Walmart.

A. As vice president and regional general manager, I'm responsible for making sure our stores deliver what our customers have come to expect of Walmart. That means making sure we have quality products and relevant community merchandise at our everyday low prices so that our customers can save money and communities can live better when they shop in any of our 135 stores in my region from Tampa Bay to Florida City.

I'm assisted by a team of 15 market managers who each oversee an average of eight to 10 stores, respectively, and are responsible for more than 40,000 Walmart associates in Florida.

Q. And your offices in Doral?

A. My true office is on the road, since I spend most of my time visiting the stores and talking to associates throughout my region.

However, our administrative and real estate teams have a presence in Doral. Also at Doral is a regional and global food sourcing team which allows our business leaders to be in the field and accessible to our customers, local vendors and suppliers in the communities we serve.

Q. Florida now ranks as Walmart's second-largest state after Texas. Tell us about your overall presence in Florida and in Miami-Dade and Broward.

A. Florida is the second largest state in the country in terms of Walmart presence. Walmart operates 335 retail units in Florida and eight distribution centers — 43 of which are located in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties. All told, there are 217 Supercenters, 59 Neighborhood Markets, 14 Discount Stores, and 45 Sam's Clubs across Florida.

We employ more than 95,000 associates in the state and support an additional 65,000 jobs through our Florida-based suppliers. Last year, the Walmart Foundation supported Florida-based nonprofits to the tune of \$67 million.

Q. I know that Walmart recently has been expanding and adding new stores in Florida. Please tell me more about that.

A. Over the last three years, we have been focused on increasing our grocery offerings through store expansions, new Supercenter openings and new smaller-format Neighborhood Market locations.

Our customers today expect fresh food at lower prices when they walk into a Walmart — and that's a testament to the inroads we have made in providing groceries. Our smaller-footprint Neighborhood Markets have been very successful with customers, because of the quick and easy access they offer to a wide variety of affordable food and products.

We are thrilled to extend our brand to communities across the state and will have realized 25 new Walmart store openings by our fiscal year-end (January 2015).

Q. How about here in Miami-Dade and Broward? Where are the new stores located?

A. Today, Walmart operates 43 stores in Dade and Broward with over 13,000 associates. This year alone we have opened several stores throughout Miami Dade and Broward Counties. Communities like Naranja and Fountainbleau, have new stores. The City of Miramar store recently re-grand opened after an expansion that included a full service grocery addition. The City of Miami just last week got its first Neighborhood Market in Flagami, and in January we will open stores in Northside-Miami and Miami Gardens. Several additional stores are either underway or about to begin construction in cities like Hollywood, Tamarac, Fort Lauderdale, and Davie.

Miami-Dade is home to two of Walmart's largest volume stores in the United States. Please tell me about that.

I am proud of the fact that two of our top-performing stores in the country are located in Miami-Dade, in Doral and Hialeah. This success is a sign of the large customer base we have here, in one of the most culturally diverse regions in the country – and Walmart's ability to offer products and services that appeal to everyone.

Q. Walmart is also one of the largest employers in South Florida. How many employees do you have and how has that number increased?

Walmart has a proven track record of creating jobs in South Florida and supporting the local economy. We employ more than 13,000 people in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Year-over-year we are creating more opportunities for direct employment with our expansions and new stores as well as an economic boost for ancillary services and businesses that support our stores.

I started at Walmart as an hourly associate and eventually became a manager. No matter where you start, there is opportunity to grow. In fact, 75 percent of store management teams started as hourly associates.

Q. What about other new stores that are in the works here? Where does the legal appeal regarding Midtown Miami currently stand?

A. We have been working closely with the city of Miami and surrounding residents for years to bring a store that will fit the character of Midtown, while serving customers in and around the area. We are pleased with a recent Circuit Court decision that affirmed nearly all of the arguments that Walmart and the city delivered to the court regarding the appeal, and now look forward to receiving an amended permit as soon as possible so we can move forward with constructing the store and providing our customers with affordable groceries and hundreds of new jobs.

Additional stores that are in the works include a Supercenter at the site of the former Hollywood Fashion Mall, which has been abandoned for a decade; and a Supercenter in the Northside area of Miami-Dade, an area where we will be the first major project/investment in decades.

Q. What is different about your customer base and merchandise mix in Miami-Dade and Broward?

A. Each Walmart store tailors its grocery and merchandise offerings to the neighborhoods it serves, while providing opportunities to local vendors who specialize in those goods. From Jamaican sodas and Haitian coffee, to Tres Leche cakes in our bakeries and organics, to Passover items, our merchandise mix has to be as diverse as the South Florida communities we serve.

A. You've been with Walmart since 1995. Please tell me about your progression with the company.

A. I started at Walmart as an hourly associate in my home state of California. From that point on, my growth trajectory continued as I rose to operations director for California, where I helped implement store expansions by adding groceries. From there I moved on to market manager for several stores in Orange and Los Angeles counties and was later promoted to vice president and regional manager for Alabama and the Florida Panhandle.

Finally in 2011, I was promoted to my current role as vice president and regional general manager for South Florida. I am proud to be overseeing the South Florida Region as a local resident of the town of Davie.

Q. What are the best and hardest parts of your job?

A. What I enjoy most is serving customers and providing employment opportunities in neighborhoods across my region.

The most challenging part of my job is overseeing more than 130 stores and ensuring that the service customers receive remains consistent across the board.

Q. What is next for you?

A. Right now, there is still so much to do in South Florida. My focus is on ensuring Walmart continues to provide the best possible selection and service to residents within the region through existing and future stores.

ELISE VASQUEZ-WARNER

Title: Vice president and regional general manager for Walmart in South Florida. (Her territory extends from Tampa-St. Petersburg to Florida City.)

Region: From Tampa-St. Petersburg to Florida City.

Years with Walmart: 19.

Age: 44.

Born: Redding, California.

Lives: In Davie.

Education: Bachelor of arts in Spanish from California State University, Chico.

Personal: Married, son 13, daughter 11.