



BUILDING BRIDGES

Ambition, big dreams and music took Barbro Ehnbohm to America. For the last ten years she has taken America to the Swedish life science industry.

TEXT by ANNELI HIDALGO
PHOTO by SALSS

BARBRO EHNBOM GREETs me with a big smile at her office in the Stockholm School of Economics. The New York resident is back in her old hometown for a longer visit, partly to organize things for the upcoming 10th anniversary of SALSS, the Swedish American Life Science Summit in August. A dedicated business woman with forty years on Wall Street behind her, she is the brains behind this annual event.

Being the youngest of five siblings Barbro Ehnbonm became very competitive early on and had "power dreams like nobody else" as a little girl. Wall Street was not part of the initial life plans though. Her childhood dream was to become a veterinarian.

"It was all I ever wanted. I had all kinds of animals growing up and as a little girl I would spend my summers at a little farm in the south of Sweden, making friends with cows, hens and sheep. I truly connected with the animals," Barbro says.

As Barbro investigated the veterinary program she found out that the school was advising young girls against entering the profession, partly since it was said that it would mean huge costs for them. "So I listened to them. It would have been another kind of life, for sure," Barbro reflects.

Instead she entered the world of economics and finance and started at the Stockholm School of Economics. Barbro thrived at the school and describes it as a fantastic time, making friends for life and laying the foundations of a long career. But being a female student at the school was not without its challenges. One day as she was on her way to a seminar, a male student stopped her as she was walking up the stairs and told her, "Sweetpea, the secretary courses are in the evening time." The comment was painful but also spurred her to outperform her male counterparts. One year later, she was a teacher at the school.

Barbro moved to the Big Apple and soon launched into a fast career, becoming

the first and only woman in the management of the American pharmaceutical giant that today is known as GlaxoSmithKline. But being successful in the male-dominated business world of New York proved to be quite tough.

"My first boss took me out to see an adult movie. As I wasn't keen on going along with his plans, he turned against me. I was 23 years old and had just started my career. It was difficult and there was no one to talk to. But pretty soon I got promoted to a position above him. That was quite a revenge too," states Barbro Ehnbonm, but also adds that the pharmaceutical industry turned out to be very rewarding and that it was an easy decision for her to collaborate with Pfizer for the Female Economist of the Year Scholarship.

PROMOTING YOUNG WOMEN

Alongside her job, Barbro also got involved in music, art and ballet in her spare time and fourteen years ago, she decided to give back to her Alma Mater by creating a scholarship for talented female students. Each year one talented student is awarded the Female Economist of the Year and gets a tailor made working experience at a carefully selected host company. Barbro's role is to be the women's mentor and promoter.

TEN YEARS OF MEETINGS

The Swedish American Life Science Summit is now in its tenth year. The idea behind SALSS emerged when she was involved in Swedish biotech meetings at the famous 600 Park Avenue in New York. The concept was presenting cutting edge new Swedish biotech to owners of large investment companies. It was a perfect combination, setting up cool Swedish biotech firms with the big American investment houses. The first Swedish-American Life Science Summit in Stockholm was arranged in 2005 and was an instant success. Sweden contributed with great research from Pharmacia and AstraZeneca, while America provided the big investors.

"Getting the opportunity to sit next to a Nobel Prize winner and talk about

science in a relaxed setting – that is priceless. Or, meeting the CEO of one of the biggest pharma companies could obviously result in new exciting collaborations. If you are a small firm in need of investments, you might just find your next investor. If you make use of your time at the Summit, there are many opportunities," is Barbro Ehnbonm's advice.

Barbro believes that the success of SALSS is bringing together key decision makers of the industry in an intimate setting. "You get to meet people you will do business with, but you also become friends. I've wanted to keep it quite small with not more than a hundred participants. That way the speakers are also the audience, which almost never happens. These scientists and business people are used to giving a speech and then leaving the party. But here, they stay and listen to the others, have dinner, listen to music and make important new connections," she explains.

The theme of the 10th annual Swedish American Life Science Summit is the Future of Medicine and will bring together some of the most prominent researchers and investors from the United States, Europe and Asia. Topics will include Stem Cell Applications, Robotics, Exponential Growth of Science and Aging Research driving the Future of Medicine.

LOOKING AHEAD, HER

ambitions for the annual event are to continue contributing to Swedish-International relationships and to promote Sweden's Life Sciences.

"In the future, SALSS will of course maintain its international profile – the global outlook is crucial for Swedish Life Sciences. The Summit ties together Sweden and the United States, but also creates ties with countries like China, India and Brazil – new markets, that provide challenging but potentially very lucrative opportunities for Swedish scientists and companies," concludes Barbro Ehnbonm. 