



## R.G. “Kelly” Caldwell Jr.

### Family ties

**BY RUTH LANDO**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN WAGNER**

R.G. “Kelly” Caldwell Jr. likes to build things.

A home on eight acres in Venice for his wife, Melissa, and three young boys. A thriving trust company now celebrating its 20th anniversary. A cadre of co-workers who believe in being good citizens and careful stewards of their customers’ fortunes. A life that revolves around family, community service and exercise.

At 46, Kelly’s personal and career lives are a seamless whole.

“The one beautiful thing that I believe and that I like about my life is that there is no separation between work and play,” Kelly explains. “If I don’t take care of my family life, my work suffers. And if I don’t take care of my work life, my family suffers. I’ve been fortunate enough to learn that from my dad. And that’s kind of been the driving force, to balance those two.”

Growing up in Venice in a tight-knit family with two older sisters and loving and successful parents, Kelly learned to work hard and play hard. He joined his father, Roland, in 1988, at what was then Caldwell & Co. Together in 1993 they chartered Caldwell Trust.

“Our business has always been about family,” he notes. “We are family-run and controlled and the business we’re in is taking care of families. ... The trust business is about helping. It’s what we do. How would you ever function if you didn’t think about it that way?”

With Kelly at the helm as CEO and president, the firm has grown to \$600 million in assets with offices in Sarasota and Venice, providing trust and estate, investment and retirement services to wealthy clients. Kelly says modestly that he’s had to “learn how to be a boss,” but sees his key role as empowering his employees — giving them what they need to deliver top services to their customers. “If I don’t give them what they need, what was

I thinking about hiring them for?” he asks with characteristic frankness.

That includes backing his staff in their personal causes, from memberships in service organizations to allocating company budget for donations to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota County, Tidewell Hospice, the Florida Center for Early Childhood and Venice Theater, among others. If employees champion a cause, Kelly is there for them. Education, children’s welfare and human services are high on the list. Caldwell Trust sponsors scholarships in the College of Business at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, and Kelly serves on the foundation for State College of Florida’s investment advisory committee. He’s won many awards from the Sertoma Club of Venice, sits on the South County Family YMCA Foundation board, and along with Melissa, volunteers with the Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry Gulfcoast Chapter. Kelly also supports the Suncoast Foundation for the Handicapped, which

leverages funds raised from the Offshore boat races and other events to build infrastructure for charities serving families.

"To me, it is the perfect combination of private enterprise, public charitable good and government," he says. The newly appointed president of the Argus Foundation also tells me, "I like working at things that make the community better. If we don't have a strong, vibrant business, then we can't support whatever causes we want to support."

Venice is Kelly's hometown, although he was born in Muncie, Ind. His dad bestowed a great treasure on his children by moving them to Nassau, then a British colony, when Kelly was 2. By the age of 7, Kelly had forged a lifelong connection to the water: swimming, boating, fishing, diving, snorkeling, spear fishing and enjoying all that island life can offer an athletic boy. When Bahamian independence forced foreign business owners out, Kelly's family moved to Florida, settling in Venice.

He graduated from Venice High School in 1984 and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering with high honors from Georgia Institute of Technology in just four years. While there, Kelly excelled in swimming, adding three varsity letters to his resume. A short-distance freestyler in the 100 and 200 meters, he was an achiever who fully planned to transition to law school right after college. At Georgia Tech, he and other engineering students did classified work for the Department of Defense. That was fun, but although Kelly loved the mental challenges of designing flares and missiles, he discovered he was too much of a people person to toil away on secret projects in a dark room with a bunch of "mad scientists."

Kelly returned home to Venice in 1998 and decided to defer law school for a year, live on a houseboat and be a "beach bum." That lasted about a week. Crediting his parents for

instilling a "run-your-own-business entrepreneurial spirit" in him and his sisters (his dad was a noted investment advisor and institutional money manager, and his mother owner of a successful property management company), Kelly soon developed his own interest in the work of Caldwell and Company and changed his mind about law school forever. By 1992, father and son had founded Caldwell Trust Co., with independence and personal service as their trademarks. They were chartered in 1993 and have grown steadily, prospering by being nimble and innovative. "Faster, quicker, cheaper and better ... that's our motto," Kelly says.

Kelly and Melissa used to be into extreme sports and met while doing a triathlon. They progressed to adventure racing, with Melissa part of Kelly's support team. They won grueling three-day and longer competitions, and Kelly liked that the races were "human powered," requiring finesse with maps and compasses, and lots of stamina.

"In 36 hours you don't have to sleep," he tells me with a completely straight face. "In 50 hours, you have to. Or at least, I did." The couple also ran marathons, but now as parents, they have gone back to sprint triathlons that can be accomplished in about an hour, or a morning at the beach. The 6-foot one-inch competitor says he's in the worst shape of the past 15 years and doesn't go to the gym anymore. (You wouldn't know it to look at him.) He would rather spend his time training with Melissa and loading their boys, ages 4, 6 and 8, into a golf cart and taking turns doing 5-mile runs. Like their dad, the boys are swimmers, but they also play baseball and tennis, fish, boat and study Spanish, even in the summer. "I want them to have a broad exposure so they can figure out what they like," Kelly says. "I just want them to think for themselves."

The family also goes on boating, fishing and diving adventures to the Caribbean whenever possible. Kelly is getting better at the incredibly difficult sport of free diving, and takes special classes with world experts who have taught him how to control his breath down to depths of 115 feet.

On his bucket list is a dream to someday take Melissa, the kids and a boat and "just go." A powerboat, that is, not a sailboat. Kelly Caldwell needs to be able to outrun things. "To choose when to go and to know you're going to get there within a reasonable period of time," he explains. To not be buffeted by fickle winds. It's all about charting a course — the right and honorable course — with family and friends along as guides and fellow travelers.

#### WHERE WE ATE:

Barnacle Bill's downtown.

#### WHAT WE ATE:

Kelly: Asian chicken salad, a cup of lobster bisque and sweet tea. Me: Crab cake salad, a cup of lobster bisque and my usual Arnold Palmer.

## Regional Premiere

941.351.8000  
ASOLOREP.ORG

Starring

**Mary Testa**

Tony-nominated actress seen  
last season in *Love, Loss &  
What I Wrote*



# My Brilliant Divorce

by **Geraldine Aron**

directed by  
**Michael Donald Edwards**

"Absolutely,  
positively  
brilliant"

- Southampton Press

**JUNE 26 - JULY 14**  
previews June 23 & 25

sponsored by **Herald-Tribune**  
media group

**Holiday Inn**  
SARASOTA AIRPORT

**Fifth Avenue**

**TAMAYA**  
LIMAR VALLEY  
WINE & SPIRITS

**TOD**  
TOURIST DEVELOPMENT TRAVEL SERVICES

**ASOLO REPERTORY THEATRE**