

Citizen Vicki

A onetime corporate wife sticks it to Big Oil. By Amy Dawes

She makes a most unlikely activist. With her swingy blond hair, her pearls and tailored pantsuits, and her soft, sorority-bred way of speaking, Vicki Lewis Middleton would seem more at home addressing a circle of adoring elementary school students than taking on Big Oil.

And yet here she is on Century Cable's public access Channel 3, standing in front of a cardboard replica of downtown's ARCO building and telling us exactly what the company's board of directors is doing that they—and we, as Americans—should be ashamed of.

"Just because what they're doing in Burma is legal, that doesn't mean it's ethical," says Middleton in her sweet but urgent voice, referring to ARCO's continuing partnership with the military dictatorship there. "The people in Burma who are political prisoners have asked us to use our freedom to promote theirs. And I would just like to say that, as Americans, don't you want people who are being oppressed to have somebody to look up to? And if we're not it, who is?"

Middleton holds up photographs of ARCO directors like Frank Boren, Lowdrick Cook, and chairman Mike Bowlin and asks us to write to them on behalf of the tortured and enslaved Burmese. She wants ARCO to pull out of Burma, just as Texaco, PepsiCo, Hewlett-Packard, and other American companies have recently done in response to public and shareholder pressure surrounding ethical issues.



Ms. Vicki:
ARCO narc

LEFT TO RIGHT: JONATHAN ALCOORN/ZUMA; PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAWN LAKSMI

ACTIVISM

"I was shaking, I was so nervous," Middleton says later about the program, one of several she's put together on the need for a return to ethical leadership in corporations and government. What makes her boldness doubly remarkable is that she comes to it from a background as a seen-but-not-heard ARCO corporate wife.

"As a wife, you never talk about anything important," notes Middleton. "I've definitely been blazing a trail."

A longtime Junior Leaguer and former Republican—she now counts herself independent—Middleton's overriding sincerity has made her a stand-out speaker. "I really try to focus on being good-natured," she says. "There's just too much anger out there already."

Three years ago, Vicki Middleton was not a person you'd peg to rock the boat. Born in tiny Magnolia, Arkansas, and raised in Dallas ("the materialism capital of the world"), she was busy putting down roots befitting a future chairman of the ARCO corporation, the position she fully believed her husband, Jim, would soon inherit. "I'm a nester," says Vicki, who majored in "family social science" in college.

In anticipation of the promotion, the couple purchased a \$2.6 million home in the Palisades. Then came a shift in the winds at ARCO that left Middleton, the former president of ARCO Dallas, with a golden parachute and license to play all the golf he wanted.

For Vicki, who was 41 at the time, the forced retirement came as a shock, but what began as a crisis soon bloomed into a personal awakening. Desperate to find a focus for her feelings of unease and betrayal, Vicki stumbled onto a liberating discovery—the 10-year-old Marina del Rey–based Josephson Institute of Ethics. The nonprofit organization, founded by former law pro-

fessor Michael Josephson, is devoted to promoting ethics in society through more than 100 programs annually, including the Character Counts! coalition promoting character education in schools.

Middleton emerged with a platform for what she believes the country needs. "Something can save our society, and that is ethics," she says. Through her every-month-or-so cable-access program, dubbed *Let's Make the World a Better Place*, this new-minted activist hammers away at issues confronting the nation, including the need for campaign finance reform.

Middleton has had a close look at how major corporations reel in candidates. "ARCO is the No. 2 giver to the Republican Party," says Middleton, who used to fly along by corporate jet to hobnob at the

White House. "It was a heady experience," she recalls. "But this is supposed to be the people's government. I don't think it's right for ARCO to own a couple of senators."

Amazingly, her relations with her husband have survived her outspokenness. "He's just the greatest guy," says Vicki. "I have so much respect for him." Jim Middleton, who spends a lot of time at the Bel-Air Country Club, has even offered her seed money if she runs for the U.S. Senate as an independent—an option she's considering.

Occasionally, she crosses paths with ARCO chairman Bowlin, her neighbor in the Palisades. "I have a lot of compassion for Mike, for the pressure he's under to deliver a higher stock price," says Middleton, whose financial security remains tied up in ARCO stock options. "A lot of corporate executives have gotten the directive that shareholder value is No. 1. But I don't believe we can sacrifice ethics for short-term gain. I believe there are some things that just cost too much." ☛

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