

# There's no stopping her

**Maryville's Brenda Sellers is always on the go as a boss, an innovator, an adventurer**

By **Bonny C. Millard** | Correspondent

[Print](#) | [Front Page](#) | [Email this story](#)



Brenda Sellers looks like she could have stepped from a fashion magazine page, polished and classy.

The president of Chroma, a manufacturer of automobile accessories located in Blount County, Sellers has been running the show for 15 years. At the same time, she's raised a son, taken some impressive treks as a world traveler-daredevil, and handled innovative product lines from Hello Kitty to Star Wars sold side by side with John Deere, Ford, Dodge and Chevrolet.

Nearing the end of a busy work day, she's fresh and energetic, but that's a perpetual state with her. She admits she's driven, but she wants to have fun too. Fun is a word that she uses often.

Dressed in a red jacket and a black skirt with polka dots, she wears matching polka dot jewelry, scarf and shoes. She confesses that most of what she's wearing is from a recycled clothing bag that employees contribute to, saying she's a recycler, but not much of a shopper. Her femininity – combined with a quick laugh and bright smile – belies the savvy business woman that she is, but in talking with Sellers a short time, it becomes clear that she's no pushover in the business world.

Sellers rides a Harley Davidson motorcycle and explains that she grew up around motorbikes with her brothers. She's hard-charging, chasing her imagination both in her personal life and in business.

She's jumped out of planes, swam with sharks and piranhas, and attempted to climb to basecamp at Mt. Everest. She's spent the night at about every peculiar dwelling conceivable, including the legendary home of Lizzie Borden, the Underwater Hotel in Florida, and the Stanley Hotel in Colorado, the setting for Stephen King's novel, "The Shining."

Punctual for an interview at Chroma headquarters in Big Springs Industrial Park in Maryville, Sellers works not more than a few miles from where she grew up in Prater Flats in Louisville, a small town in Blount County.

She's cordial to an unexpected salesman hoping to sell her an aerial photo of the building. Being a photographer herself, she listens politely before sending him on his way.

In the conference room surrounded by product samples, Sellers has a casual air, laughing frequently as she shares stories of her life and her successes in business. She offers candy corn flavored M&Ms left over from an earlier management meeting.

"We work hard. We play hard. That's kind of our motto," Sellers says. "We have a lot of employees, staff members, who've been here for 30-plus years, and they're very dedicated."



Chroma of Maryville and the Harley Davidson brand go together with many products such as decals but also boots made for bikes.

-- Chase Malone

"We start every meeting with, 'Where are we having lunch?' it seems to be priority." She says, laughing: "We have a lot of fun."

Chroma opened its current 55,000 square foot manufacturing facility in 2004. PlastiColor, located in California, is another division, and the business also has a couple of factories in China. Sellers says 85 percent of the products are made here in Tennessee.

The company is privately held, and Sellers declines to share specific details such as employee numbers or sales figures, except to say that the business is the leader in automobile aftermarket accessories.

These are the items that people use to dress up their automobiles, trucks, motorcycles and other transportation modes. License plate frames, floor mats, seat cushions, key chains, the stick families seen on cars, window decals and graphics, and chalk markers are just a few of the products.

“We make very fun types of products,” she says. “Out there in the lobby, that’s all the different brands we make, from Hello Kitty to Harley Davidson.”

A large wall of logo signs showcase the brands the company is licensed to produce. Chroma makes the products, which are then sold at a number of different retailers including AutoZone, Walmart, Advance Auto Parts, O’Reilly Auto Parts, Pep Boys Auto, and Carquest Auto Parts. A lobby sign notes that these are Chroma’s customers. Products are sold in more than 20,000 stores worldwide.

“It’s a fun business. We make cardeliers, which is a little chandelier that goes in a car. It’s really cute and fun.”

“One of the top items we had at our AAPEX show, which is the biggest (AAPEX and SEMA trade show), was a Hello Kitty Dashboard Dancer, and as you drive, she dances.” Sellers laughs again, clearly enjoying the work she does.

“It’s really innovative. It’s just adorable. So now we’re making Betty Boop ones, and we have the Star Wars brand. It is a whole different category. It was so popular...it was the most talked about product at the show because it’s cute, and it was unique, instead of the hula girls...That’s been around forever. This is kind of a new little twist on it.”

Sellers wants Chroma’s products to be on the cutting edge of the market as well as offer the perennial favorites.



Chroma president Brenda Sellers of Maryville shows off a sign with logos from all of the company's clients.  
-- Bonny C. Millard

“We just recently got Star Trek. We have the top brands. We have Honda. We’ve got John Deere. We’ve got Harley Davidson, Disney and now you see all the Marvel characters and Warner Bros. characters so we have anything that’s cool, trendy, and also that’s been around.”

Employees take pride in the products that they help create. Much like the traveling game, “Punch bug,” the company has its own version based on the products.

“We have what we call ‘Chroma Sightings.’ Chroma Sightings are in our employee newsletter,” she explains. “Once you start seeing our products on vehicles, then you know it’s like a Chroma sighting.”

A love for car products comes naturally for Sellers, who grew up on a farm with an older and younger brother, riding trail bikes, sticking her nose under the hood of cars and other vehicles, and taking things apart and putting them back together again. Still, her current position wasn’t on her famous “to do” list.

“I really just wanted to be a mom,” she says, and in the end, she got both. She went to business school in Knoxville and worked a couple of sales jobs.

“I wanted to be in Blount County and ended up getting hired here in the billing department. And what’s funny about being the mom, ended up, I only had the one son, but I raised what I call my other 15 kids, and of those 15 kids, you’ll see them on my Facebook page. I’m still very involved in those 15 kids’ lives, and they’re all having babies now.”

Sellers started at Chroma in the late 1980s, and with her sales background, she worked at several positions before taking the helm as president in 1999. Despite the fact that she was working in a male-dominated business, she earned respect and developed a reputation for a strong work ethic.

“I think that people saw that I worked hard, and they knew I was dedicated, and they knew I was driven, and I did my homework,” Sellers recalls. “I was always prepared, did my homework, and always, always went over and above.”

When asked what her management style is, Sellers pauses for a moment to consider the question.

### **Related Articles**

- [Where in the world is Brenda Sellers?](#)

“I surround myself with really, really good people. I don’t micromanage. I’m pretty much ‘Go do what you need to do,’ but [I’m] very driven...‘Whatever we did, what’s the next step? We raised the bar, but how much higher can we raise the bar?’ I’m very pleased and blessed but also very challenging, like ‘Okay, what’s the next step? How many more customers can we get? Or, who else can we sell to or what else can we do to raise the bar?’ I’m not satisfied with status quo.”

It’s a style she describes as aggressive, but one that has served her and the company well.

“That’s why we have continued to be the leader in the marketplace with our types of products. We are very driven to stay the best.”

“If somebody says we can’t do it, okay, just wait and see. We don’t use the “c” word here – We don’t use the ‘can’t’ word here.”

“I think my other management style is Plan B...This too shall pass because whatever situation it is, whether good or bad, there’s always a Plan B. It is funny how my name started with [B for] Brenda because that what it means, Plan B.”

“I was just trying to think if you asked that question to people who work here, and I think they would say, ‘fair.’ I just want to be fair and fun, and what else can we do to raise the bar.”

Later during the interview, an employee comes into the conference room, and after introductions, Sellers asks her what she thinks. The woman bursts out laughing but says that Sellers leads by example and adds, “We know what you want.” The comfortable relationship the two have is apparent.

The boss is well-known for her philanthropic activities in the Blount County community but much of it is done without public fanfare. She’s served on several boards including past chair of United Way of Blount County. She once even jumped into a large puddle of mud to raise \$1,000 for the Epilepsy Foundation. She was inducted into The Daily Times Wall of Fame, named the 2013 Blount Partnership Philanthropist of the Year and received a corporate award of Woman of the Year in 1990.

Carolyn Forster, a long-time community volunteer who has worked with Sellers on different projects, says that Sellers brings energy to a room when she enters it. “She’s always doing things with a smile.”

Forster recalls a ribbon cutting ceremony for an outhouse at the Great Smoky Mountain Heritage Center in Townsend last May. Sellers, whose donation helped restore the structure, had the event catered, and guests attended for free with one requirement: bring a roll of toilet paper. The toilet paper was donated to the New Hope Children’s Advocacy Center and Blount County Habitat for Humanity.

“Brenda Sellers is so unique. This woman has just sort of made it her life’s mission to make our community the best place it can be,” Forster says. “Everything she does, she just tries to make it benefit the community. I think we all look at her and wonder how she does it, and she does it all with a smile.”

Forster shared a personal story about Sellers’s giving spirit. When Forster’s late husband, General Fred Forster, a beloved and long-time community leader, had to go to Nashville for cancer

treatments, Sellers drove to Nashville to bring the Forsters some items they might need for the long stay, visited with them for a time, and then returned to Maryville.

“I mean that’s the kind of person she is. I’ll never ever forget that,” Forster says. “It meant so much to us, and she doesn’t want recognition for it. She just does it.”

And, that’s goes for business as well.

“I ended up being in a business that I love. I don’t ever remember not driving. I’m a car buff and to get into a business, and especially a business that didn’t have women, I felt like had I had something to prove,” she explains. “I love car shows. On my vacations or on my time off, I’m at a car museum or at a car show. I live it. I breathe it.”