

# EXCEPTIONAL

*People*



MAGAZINE

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## Women of Excellence and Influence Exceeding Barriers

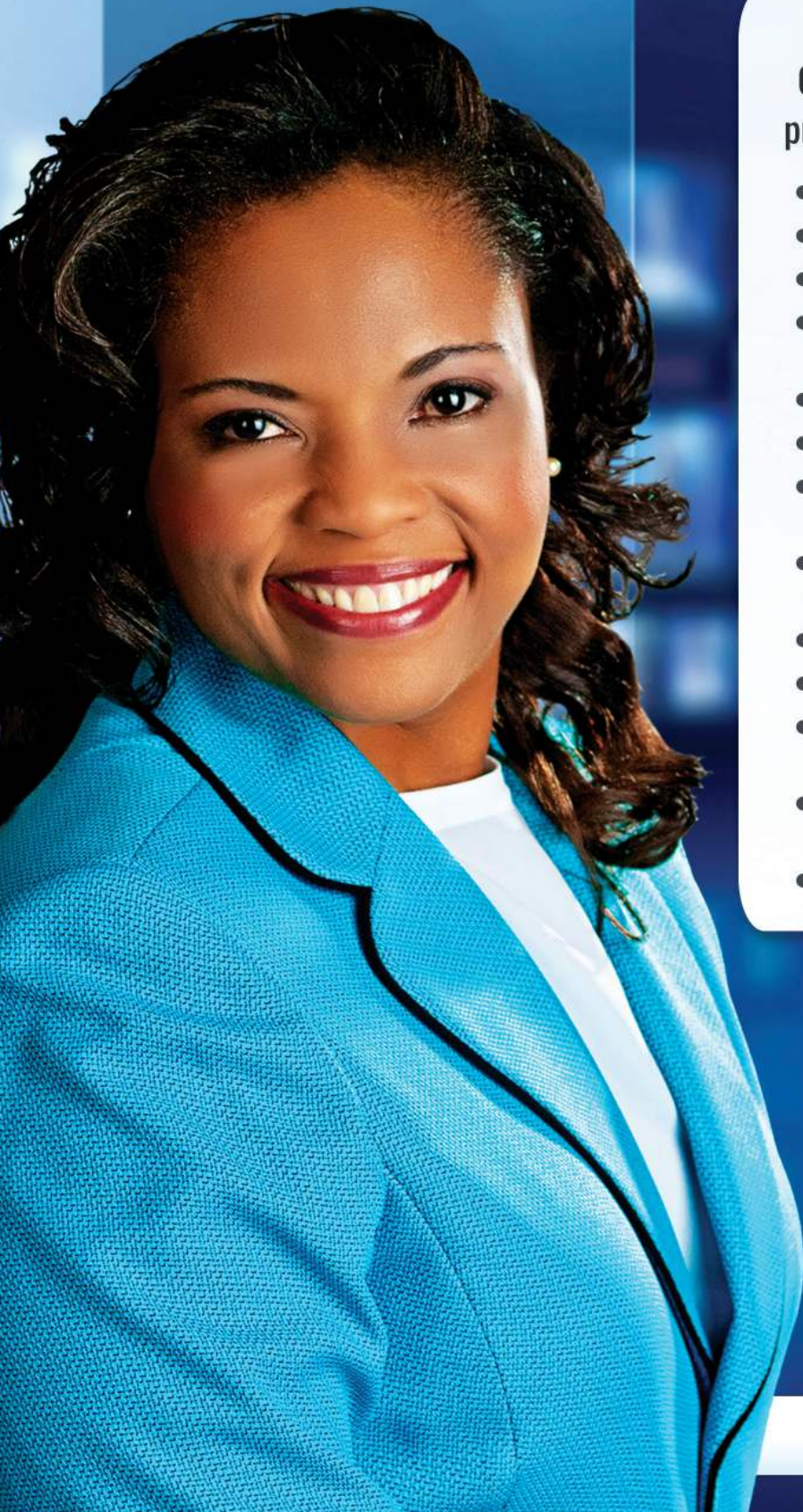
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## **MONICA DAVIS**

18 year media veteran and  
subject matter expert,  
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*Lillian Dukes*

NAVIGATED FROM **ENGINEER** TO  
**CORPORATE VICE PRESIDENT**

## EXTRAORDINARY PROFILES

Lillian Dukes navigated her way from a career as an engineer to one as a vice president and global operations leader. In the last 20-plus years, Dukes has improved start-up, turnaround, and mature manufacturing environments using her strategic organizational skills. She has also implemented cost reduction and sustainable growth at a variety of companies, including American Airlines, American Eagle Airlines, Spirit AeroSystems, and General Electric.

Dukes is not only an international public speaker, but also a well-known mentor and humanitarian leader. She mentors students and employees in their professional growth.

Lillian Dukes' interview is filled with extraordinary advice that can last you a lifetime. We hope you find as many golden nuggets of inspiration as we did.

**Monica:** Would you say that you chose your career or did it choose you? When did you realize that the field of aviation and aeronautics was your calling?

**Lillian:** My career was birthed out of my love for math. It was a journey of discovery. My initial exposure to aeronautics was immediately out of college during a stint working for GE in their satellite division in Valley Forge, PA. This path later transitioned into a 25-year career in aviation. Aviation was initially chosen out of necessity. I stayed in the field for the excitement and challenge of doing something different on a daily basis. When I think of how careers are formed, I think it's more about searching endlessly for an opportunity to do what you love in an environment that you enjoy.

**Monica:** Not all paths are straight on the road to success; we all must take some detours on the way to our destinations. What lessons have you learned along the way that helped you become the best version of yourself and how did those lessons help you move upward while working in the industry?

**Lillian:** The best version of myself developed out of a need to be true to my beliefs and the things I enjoy. It was not uncommon for me to change positions because the joy in my work had waned. In the past, I have moved from a professional environment to volunteer work and from engineering to supply chain in search of the next challenging opportunity and a chance to make a difference. I have had the pleasure of experiencing engineering, supply chain, operations, maintenance, and manufacturing. Through all of these experiences, I have learned that satisfaction for me is a combination of both professional endeavors and humanitarian pursuits; it's these environments that allow me to lead as well as get involved in the day-to-day work. It's going to sleep at

night knowing that I have operated with integrity, been fair in my business dealings, and made the best decisions I could based on what I knew at the time.

As far as upward mobility is concerned, my progression came as a combination of having excellent mentors and sponsors, a willingness to take risks with new opportunities, being open to moving to more remote locations, and embracing change as an opportunity to reinvent myself. Hindsight being 20-20, I am thankful for the opportunity to learn from both my successes and my mistakes and move on in the knowledge that I can do better the next time.

**Monica:** What were a couple of challenges you encountered during the pursuit of your career and how did you overcome them?

**Lillian:** Challenge number one was being female in predominantly male environments. Learning to navigate the political climate had its challenges; however, growing up with 17 brothers and having savvy mentors helped me excel in these environments. My mentors shared with me information others would not. They let me know how I was perceived by the executive team and what I needed to do to overcome misconceptions.

Another challenge experienced in these male environments was not being included in certain activities. Decision makers get to know potential succession candidates during recreational outings such as golfing and hunting. It was very unlikely for a female to be invited on any of these trips. But that's where relationships were developed and promotional decisions made.

**Monica:** You have become an extraordinary leader in your field. What strategy would you advise women to take if they're considering entering a similar field that's dominated by men?

**Lillian:** I would advise women in predominantly male fields to identify mentors they respect and trust. Focus on developing meaningful relationships with them and maintaining those relationships throughout their careers. As they progress in leadership, women will also need to find sponsors. Sponsors are people who have a seat at the table and are part of the succession planning process. These people are crucial the higher you progress through executive leadership roles.

It should also be noted that most of these mentors and sponsors will be men. Since few women are in these fields, finding a female mentor may be very difficult. Professional organizations like AWESOME provide opportunities for female supply chain executives to network and discuss their

career strategies. If you are a female executive, by all means be a mentor to other women in your organization!

**Monica:** When you began your journey on this path, who mentored and encouraged you to press forward regardless of the challenges you might face?

**Lillian:** My best mentors have been former bosses and colleagues. They challenged me, provided guidance, and were always very open and honest with me. They have all become very good friends and still provide valuable guidance even at this point in my career. All of them are men.

Later in my career, I added a woman to my list of mentors. She is an executive coach who has become a good friend and has been invaluable in helping me develop a comprehensive strategy for my professional and personal pursuits.

**Monica:** You've helped shape the future of companies like Spirit AeroSystems, American Airlines, and General Electric. These represent aviation and technology – two huge industries that continue to have a great impact on how we live on a daily basis. What does it mean to you to know you've played a role in shaping the way these companies do business and develop sustainable growth?

**Lillian:** I guess even with all I have done, I am still not satisfied with my accomplishments. When I emerged from college, I had grand visions of conquering the world. Those visions have grown dim as the progress and impact I hoped for got harder to achieve. Reaching a level of impactful leadership where I can effect change on a larger scale has driven my pursuits. When you look at the executive leadership makeup of many companies, there is still much work to be done in advancing women at all levels — including board-level positions. Although I have not personally achieved that level yet, I hope I have been instrumental in paving the way for future leaders.

The lasting change I have made is in the people I have had the privilege of leading, those who have gone on to progress their careers in a meaningful way. That type of change is the most impactful and sustainable.

**Monica:** What motivates you every day? When you get up in morning, what do you look forward to the most?

**Lillian:** Being a breast cancer survivor, I am often reminded that life should not be taken for granted. I live with a purpose to ensure that, as one courageous 12-year-old AIDS victim said, "I do all I can, with what I have in the time I have in the place I am." That same young man died the following year.

With that in mind, I have transitioned into a consulting profession that enables me to work on my own terms, to do

humanitarian work on a regular basis, and take daily time to reflect on what really matters. Stepping back and being more thoughtful about life makes a difference in what I do every day.

**Monica:** What are the guiding principles that you live by every day?

**Lillian:** My guiding principles include:

- My relationship with God is the foundation on which I live my life.
- Integrity is not negotiable.
- "People don't care how much you know until they can see how much you care."
- Live life with enjoyment and purpose.
- Be quick to listen and slow to speak.

**Monica:** Based on your experiences at the time you began your career, what differences have you noticed in your field? In what ways have things become better for women?

**Lillian:** The increase in focus on women in STEM-related fields has increased the enrollment of women in these fields and heightened the awareness of the impact we have made in the profession. This increase in awareness has helped girls in their early years gain better insight and support in pursuing STEM-related disciplines. This increased participation in the field can be seen at the college level as well as in the workforce.

The challenge we continue to face is that although participation in STEM fields has increased, the representation of women in decision-making roles at a professional level is still lacking. There remains much work to be done at all educational and professional levels. The fact that there are still many areas where a female has yet to be the first is a testament that it's not time to start celebrating our progress.

**Monica:** To whom or what do you owe your extraordinary success?

**Lillian:** God for being my foundation! My parents for being phenomenal examples, who through their example as successful foster parents of 21 children, showed me what it meant to care about others. And a host of people who helped and supported me along the way!

**Monica:** Sometimes when you're not able to walk through "the door of opportunity", you have to create an opening where there isn't one. There will always be occasions when women are not viewed as equally as men even though they perform at the same levels and even beyond. How do you

approach those times when you need to create an opening and there doesn't seem to be one?

In the past when I have been hindered by a lack of opportunity, my approach was to first work with my mentors to determine a potential course of action. If the suggested actions were not successful in my current company, then I would seek opportunities at another company. This approach is not always easy if you are married or have other responsibilities that prevent you from picking up and moving for a better opportunity. I frequently recommend to young professionals to not be afraid to take their biggest risks early in their careers. Once you have others to consider in the decision-making process, your options may become more limited.

**Monica:** A few months ago you participated on the "Women Exceeding Barriers" panel at the Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology. Here's a quote from Dr. Sharon DeVivo, president of the college:

“ We must help the next generation of leaders. There were few females to encourage and guide us. We must rewrite the story for future leaders. Reaching back and helping the next generation is our responsibility — not an option. ”

**Lillian:** "While much progress has been made to grow the number of women in STEM fields, there is still much work to be done. Women voices in these fields add a diversity of thought that is so often needed to leapfrog innovations. Employers must create environments that are welcoming to all and designed to support traditionally underrepresented groups."

**Monica:** What areas do you believe still need improvement when it comes to equality for women in STEM fields?

**Lillian:** We need more female decision makers in all STEM fields. We must implement systems that enable us to hold institutions accountable to their efforts in increasing the number of female decision makers in their organizations. We must also improve the pipeline of females in STEM-related fields from grade school to the boardroom.

Women have a unique contribution to make in the business community. Research has shown that when we expose organizations to all types of diversity, the business experiences improvements in profitability. You would think that evidence would be a sufficient case to drive the needed change. Unfortunately, it hasn't.

**Monica:** If you could go back in time and visit yourself as

a young child right now, what advice would you share with yourself based on what you know today?

**Lillian:** I would write my young self a letter. In that letter, I would tell her that life doing what she loves will have its challenges and may at times be painful, but perseverance pays off in the long run. The key to true success lies in not allowing people to tell her she can't, not giving up when at times it feels like she is on this journey alone, not losing herself in who others say she should be but knowing who she is, and to be conscious of how her decisions impact others.

I would also encourage her to be the best at what she does, never get complacent, learn all aspects of how a company operates, gain experience running a P&L [Profit and Loss], and learning to play golf is also probably a good decision.

And as I got weary giving her this long list of things to do, I would tear it up and just say, "Live with purpose and be true to yourself." Nothing much matters after that.

**Monica:** What legacy would you like to leave and what advice would you like to offer young ladies growing up in today's world?

**Lillian:** A crucial element I have learned through the years is that great leaders are first phenomenal servants. They act with a conscious awareness of the risks and consequences of their decisions. Being entrusted with the well-being of a company and its employees is nothing to take lightly. If you desire to lead, then lead in a manner that builds people up, exceeds your fiscal responsibilities, and honors your loved ones in the process. Doing anything at the cost of your own authenticity or integrity is never worth it. Being a builder of people, leaders, and enterprises comes with great responsibility—guard it at all costs. I can only hope that I have done a good job building people, encouraging others to lead with excellence, and positioning companies for future growth.

**Monica:** Would you mind closing the interview with your last word?

**Lillian:** My closing word is to other leaders. We must help the next generation of leaders. There were few females to encourage and guide us. We must rewrite the story for future leaders. Reaching back and helping the next generation is our responsibility — not an option. We are responsible for ensuring future outcomes for women in STEM-related fields is markedly better than what we experienced. Change isn't easy or comfortable, but in the end it's always worth it! ■

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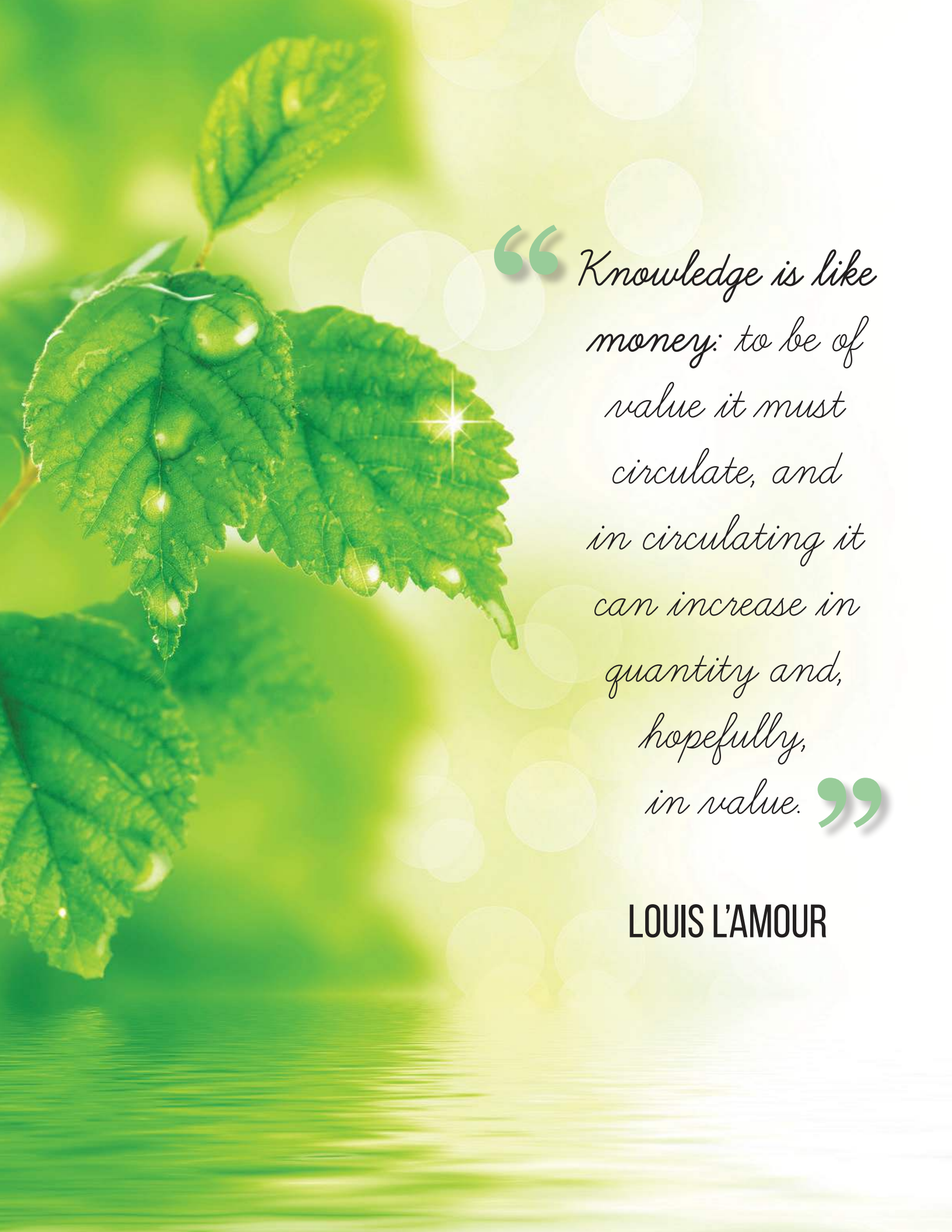


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**LOUIS L'AMOUR**