

# Mary Scott Nabers



Westside  
Stories

Forrest Preece

Somewhere in Cross Plains, Texas, there is a dining table that should be enshrined in a museum.

You see, Mary Scott Nabers, one of the most persuasive and intelligent visionaries ever to grace the political stage of Texas grew up eating meals with her family at this piece of furniture.

It was there that this precocious only child learned the basis of her craft.

"My dad was the publisher of the Cross Plains newspaper and a number of others in the surrounding region," Mary says.

"By the time I was ten, I was expected to have my own opinions about all sorts of issues and be able to argue my positions effectively."

Having that level of impetus to speak her mind and be involved in a lot of things was part of the reason why she played most of the sports available to girls in her school, was drum major of the band, participated in the school orchestra and was on the debate team.

It also gave her the zeal to start her own twirling and gymnastics summer camp at age 16 which she ran for three years. "I was a serial entrepreneur even then," Mary says.

When I located Cross Plains on the Texas map, I noticed that it was not that far from DeLeon, Texas, where another Texas political giant, Ben Barnes, grew up.

Recently, Ben and Mary joined forces to form Gemini Global Group, a consulting firm.

I asked her if they knew each other in school and she said, "No, we met when my husband, Lynn Nabers, came to the legislature to represent Ben's old legislative district. Ben was moving up to be lieutenant governor at that time and from then on he was a political mentor for both Lynn and me."

## Collaboration Nation

Right now, one of the biggest items on Mary's work plate is her important book that will be in bookstores throughout the country very soon.

Called "Collaboration Nation," it delineates how public-private partnerships are revolutionizing the country.

It only stands to reason that someone with her background would write a book like this one.

During a ten-year period she held offices of major importance including being the commissioner representing business on the Texas Employment Commission and then as Texas Railroad Commissioner (where she helped regulate \$67 billion of the Texas economy).

She served under three Texas governors—Mark White, Bill Clements and Ann Richards.

For the past 15 years, she has been running her own company, Strategic Partnerships, a private-sector firm that provides research, procurement consulting, strategy, advocacy, and business development services for firms interested in working with government.

Obviously, she has seen plenty of intense action on both sides of the public-private ledger.

"For the past 15 years, the people in my firm have been researching trends, funding flows, legislative and procurement issues and governmental needs. All of the people on my team are former government executives so we are very good at this and we provide services to many Fortune firms. Many of our clients are global and work with governments throughout the world."

Mary states that when the economy began to crater in 2007 and 2008, it became apparent

that quick fixes just were not going to make for long-term solutions.

"In the past four years, we have seen a trend that is like nothing else we'll likely experience in our lifetime. Funding has been reduced to historic levels for governmental entities, but the demands for services just keep growing."

Now private companies are bringing trillions of dollars to the table to fill the gap in facilities and services.

Government is undergoing a huge transformation through public-private partnerships where the private partner brings equity capital to the table for large public initiatives. These public-private partnerships are called P3s and the payback comes from contracts that extend for decades.

Roads, bridges, and health care facilities—all these things are being built efficiently by the private sector. Companies are buying public assets like parking garages, public buildings and the rights to operate parks. This is a major shift in how government has operated in the past.



A recent photo of Mary.

*"This thing, this new trend, is coming at us like a freight train and both public officials and corporate executives need to quickly understand the cultural differences between the two sectors. It is in the best interest of every taxpayer for these public-private partnerships to be successful."*



Mary Scott Nabers (right) at a press conference during her term as railroad commissioner in the Ann Richards administration.

She noted that many cities are privatizing all of their parking meters.

Universities are reaching out to contractors and offering to provide the land in exchange for new dorms, hotels on campus or

to retain development.

The private partner, in these cases, receives a portion of the ongoing revenue over a long period of time. The university gets much-needed infrastructure at no cost.

*"It is a business book about a new trillion dollar marketplace. It states the need for cultural understandings and deep commitments from both sides. It also challenges business to offer creative, innovative solutions to public officials."*



Mary holds a press conference about high-speed rail.

These public-private partnerships have created a huge trend and the business opportunities for companies of every type and size are extremely large.

But to make this partnership happen, governments and companies need to learn how to merge their cultures and work in harmony.

Here is an excerpt from Mary's book that puts this process into historical context.

"World War II sealed government's role as lead provider of public services, a role that manifested itself in every corner of the country beginning in the 1950s with the build-out of the toll-free interstate highway system.

"Post-war government at every level expanded in size, influence and control. The next inflection point in the cycle came in the 1980s when, during another financial crisis, President Ronald Reagan declared, 'Government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem.'

"Reagan's remark was controversial and confrontational, portraying government as the enemy of prosperity, creating a political climate that was anything but collaborative.

"While it's true that government and business operate in different worlds, it is counterproductive to think of them as combatants."

## Merging cultures.

Mary says that after attending conferences all around the country and hearing tales of woe from cities on the verge of disaster, her firm has developed what amounts to a course of study for corporate executives that tells them what they need to know to solicit and win partnerships from governments.

"Many of our global clients have trouble interacting with public officials. They don't realize that government has a totally different culture than the private sector."

For instance, governments don't discuss sales quotas, verticals within an organization or second-quarter results.

Government professionals have been trained to do things by the book and they, in the past, have been totally risk-averse. That is no longer working.

Mary puts it succinctly—"This thing, this new trend, is coming at us like a freight train

*"This is a historic transformation that everyone needs to understand – and the taxpayers need to know about it, too. That is the message the book tries to convey."*

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For governments, the only place they are going to get funding is the private sector in many cases.

To make this book happen, Mary has been burning the midnight oil for the past 14 months.

"It's been a lot of hard work but I've had input from people on both sides. And, my business partners have been wonderful to contribute to the overall manuscript," she says.

"It's not a how-to book. It is a business book about a new trillion-dollar marketplace. It states the need for cultural understandings and deep commitments from both sides. It also challenges business to offer creative, innovative solutions to public officials. Hardly any public service is not subject to being a P3 situation. Airport security, healthcare services, fee collection, construction, border security, and so much of the military is being privatized."

She notes that it helped greatly that she has so many experts in various governmental areas on her staff and she was able to draw from their knowledge base.

The confusing part for companies is that they may have excellent solutions to offer, but each state has a different set of statutes about how private sector firms can engage and at the federal level they didn't standardize anything.

The big agencies—EPA, Defense, Homeland Security—each have their own guidelines for public/private partnerships.

Mary hastens to point out that this area of commerce isn't just for the mega-corporations.

"Governments have quotas to fill for mom-and-pop-sized operations, minority-run businesses, women-owned firms, and so on. And the big firms will need smaller subcontractors when they come to a place like Austin or any other city—people who know the political lay of the land.

"This is a historic transformation that everyone needs to understand – and the taxpayers need to know about it, too. That is the message the book tries to convey." Toward that point, (and following in her dad's footsteps), Mary puts out weekly newsletters for both Texas and the entire nation about P3s and other governmental matters.

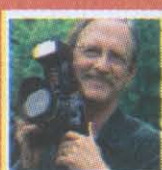
So would she want to go back into government? She laughs and says, "Oh no—I'm happy where I am!"

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## A Candid Look at Austin's Nonprofit Scene

Keep Austin Giving – an online social column by Austin photojournalist Robert Godwin – shares news and photos of the nonprofit events you attend. So whether you are in the photos or want to share them, Keep Austin Giving is your source.



Check out the latest happenings at  
[keepaustingiving.org](http://keepaustingiving.org)

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