

**Gail Baker**  
**Executive Director**  
**Central Ohio Restaurant Association**

*Gail Baker is the executive director of the Central Ohio Restaurant Association (CORA), an organization which promotes a strong and innovative restaurant industry through education, training, community involvement, and networking. CORA represents 600 companies and has 30 board members.*

*Baker helps to enhance the restaurant industry's image locally, regionally, and nationally through media, through proactive involvement in political issues, and through the Ohio Restaurant and National Restaurant affiliation.*

**Finish the statement, "When I was growing up, I wanted to be..."** An English teacher. But I got married nine days after I graduated high school. The Vietnam War was happening, and my husband got transferred to Japan, and I went with him. The plan was to be there for 18 months; we stayed for five years. My plans of being a teacher got sidetracked, but all for a good cause, I later found. **What happened next?** I worked in the Morale Welfare and Recreation Division of the Air Force, overseeing military clubs. Their clubs allowed for slot machines, so it made my work very interesting! I started managing events, dining room and bar operations. I loved the opportunity to be a part of such an entertaining scene. I was only 20 years old at the time, but I realized that this is what I really wanted to do with my life. I loved that I had the opportunity to be a part of such an amazing and entertaining scene. I even brought B.B. King into one of our clubs; I was star-struck! We eventually came home and my husband was assigned to Rickenbacker Air Force Base. I managed a club there as well. I didn't want to give up what I was doing over in Japan. At Rickenbacker, I had the opportunity to learn more about how to manage people, employees, and guests. I quickly learned how important it was to make people feel important. Over the course of my career, I've had the opportunity to coordinate events for a wide range of personalities — all the way from Frank Zappa and Richard Simmons to Jimmy Carter and George Bush, Sr. **How did you come across CORA?** I served as president of the board while serving as director of sales at another other job. Looking back, it was a lot of hard work and there were definitely some challenging moments, but I didn't mind it, because I was involved in what I was passionate about — the restaurant industry. I started to increase the exposure of the organization, and before I realized it, I was getting interviewed on television and in the papers. It was an amazing time. About three years later, I started to research a replacement for the executive director position. It occurred to me that I knew the ropes and was passionate about the industry, so with a 50 percent decrease in pay, I took it. Along with some premier owners of restaurants here in Columbus, we worked to shake up the Central Ohio Restaurant Association. It was not about the money, it was about creating an organization that would contribute to the community in a positive and powerful way. **What messages do you communicate to your members?** I encourage board members to get involved in local committees to make sure that city entities know we are a driving force. Also, we have to make sure that we are present at the table and that our voices are heard. There are more than 80,000 people working in the restaurant industry in Columbus; I feel strongly that we need to be a part of economic development discussions. In fact, CORA has worked with the Columbus Public Health Department to develop a color-coded system of safety and health regulations; these color-coded stickers can be seen on the front doors of restaurants today. **What other successes are you proud of?** CORA is the largest of nine local restaurant associations in Ohio. We've grown so admirably and I look forward to continuing to do so. Also, we're engaged in a National Restaurant Association program called "ProStart." It's a program for high school juniors and seniors interested in culinary arts and restaurant management. The program offers a full restaurant and management curriculum, and so far, seven schools in Columbus participate. We teach business management and the logistics of running and owning a restaurant. We've given \$46,000 in scholarships in the last five years. It's been a great run. **Describe yourself as a leader.** I know how to connect people with what they need. It's so important for me to listen to my members and connect them to the resources they need in order to succeed. I also try to remain true to myself and always challenge myself to do the work that I believe in. **What advice do you have for professional women?** Always, no matter what, work on your soft skills. These skills will take you through your professional and personal endeavors. **Are there any traditions you have that help to contribute to your success?** Every birthday, I ask myself, "Have I helped someone this year in an important way? Am I closer to God? Have I learned something new this year?" Those questions help me to stay focused on myself and on others.

