

Celebrating women in business

I recently joined the Morganton Business and Professional Women's organization and was thrilled to become part of a group that promotes and offers assistance to women in the business world, particularly those women in our own Burke County. The group is an advocate for women's issues, a vehicle for women to network with other women in our area and



Generations

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throughout the state, promoters of mentor relationships between women, and promises to develop women professionally so that they can enjoy success in business next to their male counterparts.

This kind of organization is so important to all of us including women who are stay at home mothers or wives. There is no question that the role of wife/mother is the most difficult job of all, especially in an economy where staying within a budget has become impossible. The stay at home mother, wife and working woman is the chief financial officer of a company called "family."

As I sat in my first meeting and listened to the speakers, I couldn't help but think back to many years ago when I first personally noticed that things were really going to change in the business world for women. This first story starts with a pair of pants.



SUNDAY,
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I was in my early 20s and working in the presiding officer's branch of county government in New York. A new slate of legislators was getting ready to meet the following day and one of the newly elected ones was a young woman in her early 30s. She was the first woman to be elected to the legislature and it was going to be her first formal meeting.

She walked into the office I shared with Thelma, my supervisor, and settled into a chair in front of my desk.

"Nervous?" Thelma asked and she nodded yes. "What can we do to help make it easier for you tomorrow?"

The young legislator thought for a few minutes and then smiled. "You can wear pants. It's about time we had the choice, don't you think?"

It was 1972 and slacks had not made it into the workplace, but that was all about to change.

The next day Thelma and I walked into work dressed in tailored slacks, crisp white shirts and jackets. Our boss, the presiding officer of the legislature, who would later become a powerful county executive, sat at his desk and peered at us over glasses that had fallen to the tip of his nose.

As we stood anxiously waiting in the doorway, he leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and said, "Are you two trying to tell me something that I may have missed in my haste to govern the county?"

"Our newest legislator decided it was about time we were allowed to wear pants," Thelma responded smugly.

He looked from Thelma to me, adjusted his glasses and said, "Uh-huh. I figured we would be in store for a couple of changes with her on board, but I didn't quite plan on this."

And there we were that first day of the legislative meeting watching the first woman county legislator who went on

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to serve a "hands on" term of office. She sponsored many important bills, including helping to amend the countywide dress code for women. Even more important, after her arrival, woman candidates for all offices became commonplace on the ballot. Throughout the years, many women were appointed to directors of major county departments and boards, replacing men who had dominated the positions for decades. The county continued to grow and today its population is over 1.5 million. Three women now sit on the legislature and one is deputy president officer.

When women band together, no matter what the reason, the union can produce positive results. My second story takes place in the 1980s when I was working as a Principal Stenog-

rapher. Stenography was becoming as obsolete as hula hoops yet the skill was still treasured by old time bosses who adored talking to a real live person taking notes on a steno pad as opposed to dictating into a cold, dull machine.

So, when I discovered that the pay rate for our group didn't recognize this extra skill, I decided to take the matter to the all-male Salary and Appeals Board, something not usually done by women let alone one in a position low on the career ladder. However, at the time, my boss was a woman and instead of backing away, she encouraged me.

I submitted my paperwork asking for an extra pay grade for principal stenographers and waited patiently to be put on the agenda. After waiting months for a meeting, the board was finally scheduled to meet, but when I didn't receive a notice and inquired, the clerk to the board told me they had lost my paperwork. The second time the board decided

to meet, again months later, I was put on the agenda, but listed last.

I knew that my appeal would never have a chance. After a full day of hearing appeals and listening to pleas from such titles as Construction Foreman IV and Deputy Crew Chief III, historically male dominated titles, the most I could hope for was that they would table my appeal for a later date.

I knew that I should have been placed on the agenda at least somewhere near the top because of the oversight so I did a little networking and wrote to every single principal stenographer in the county and asked them to send a letter to the board, which they all did. Then I wrote to 18 legislators.

I was lucky. There were two women on the legislature at the time and one decided to take the bull by the horns. Women were rallying everywhere in the 80s for equal rights and at one of her rallies, she read the contents of my

letter, finishing off her speech with, "It's time we as women stood up and refused to be shoved to the end of the line."

Wow. A few weeks later when I stood in front of the Salary Appeals Board, first on the agenda, I realized that I had once again seen women banding together and helping each other no matter where the woman fell on the food chain we call business.

Did I win the appeal? You bet. The Chairman of the Appeals Board telephoned me himself to curtly convey the news and stenography became a treasured skill for a lot of women.

We can all make a difference here in Burke County so I encourage you all to join the Morganton Business and Professional Women's organization by calling Debbie Stephenson, President, at 443-1035.

See you at a future meeting!

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