



# W *Influential* WOMEN 2020

KPC MEDIA GROUP, INC.





# Congrats, Jordi Disler!

## One of the Influential Women of Northeast Indiana.

Jordi Disler, President of Parkview LaGrange Hospital, has been selected as one of KPC Media Group's Influential Women of Northeast Indiana. This prestigious recognition honors extraordinary women in our region who are blazing trails in their professional lives and inspiring future generations to do the same. Jordi is part of the inaugural class of 2020, which includes just 16 women.

**Thank you, Jordi, for being an important member of our community and the Parkview team.**



Jordi Disler  
President, Parkview LaGrange Hospital



KPC Media Group Inc., publisher of 13 newspapers in Northeast Indiana, is pleased to share the stories and professional experience of 16 influential women in our area, chosen by KPC's Editorial Board, selected based on their contributions in business, politics, nonprofit organizations and government. Join with us at 11 a.m. Oct. 21 for a free live chat to be inspired by their experiences and have the opportunity to ask them how they built their careers. See Page 20 to register for this free live chat event!

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# ‘There is no job description you fit when you run for office’

## Ups and downs haven’t slowed Sen. Liz Brown from serving in political office

BY STEVE GARBACZ

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FORT WAYNE — In an interview, a reporter once commented to Liz Brown that “You seem to run for a lot of things.”

Maybe meant as a veiled commentary, running for multiple offices is one thing that sets Brown, a Fort Wayne-area state senator, apart from a lot of women who seek office.

She’s had some wins. She’s had some losses. Politics wasn’t a lifelong dream or anything for Brown, but she serves because she feels like she has something to offer.

In a world where elected office is still somewhat of a boys club — women in office make up far less than the 50% that they make up in the general population — Brown runs.

As studies have shown that many women candidates run once, many lose their first attempt at office and then many never run again, Brown has become one of northeast Indiana’s influential women by not following that script.

“I try to think about if I have skills that I can use somewhere else and use in a broader way,” Brown said. “I have not been thinking ahead to the next thing that moves on. I’m always thinking about what adds value to the community.”

A mother of seven, Brown’s foray into politics started as she was entering the next phase of her home life. Once her children were all high-school aged and she didn’t need to spend as much time at home, she started looking around for new opportunities.

She had already gotten involved with local organizations around Allen County prior to that, serving with some nonprofits and helping out service groups with their mission. Then she stumbled upon the Richard G. Lugar Excellence in Public Service Series, a notable statewide civics program for Republican women.

Brown entered the Lugar Series hoping to just learn more about opportunities in service, but soon found herself on the ballot for a local nonpartisan school board race.

Like many women seeking office for the first time, Brown lost.

But Brown did something not as many female candidates do afterward, she made a second run at office. Brown filed to run for Fort Wayne’s City Council as a Republican. She won her primary race and then won in 2007, gaining a seat on the city’s board.

After four years of serving on the council and not being pleased with how the city was spending its money, Brown decided to take a shot at the Republican nomination for mayor, to challenge Democrat Tom Henry in his re-election bid.

For a second time, Brown lost her campaign in the primary. Out of politics for the moment, she was spending some time teaching at St. Francis University, putting public office behind her for the moment.

But in 2014, when Indiana’s longtime District 15 Thomas Wyss announced he’d be retiring, Brown was approaching about getting back into the game.

So, again, with a lot of support from family and friends, she hit the campaign trail.

“It comes down to you, do you really want to expose yourself again,” Brown said. “I was very happy teaching at St. Francis and hadn’t really thought about any particular position. ... I have not been thinking ahead to the next thing that moves on.”

Brown won that race and has since been serving in the state Senate since.

She now chairs the Senate’s ethics committee but also serves on the appropriations committee and health and provider services committee, with a strong mind toward fiscal issues.

Brown is one of 10 women senators from both parties in Indianapolis, compared to 40 men serving in the state’s upper house. That ratio actually has gotten a little better over the years, although it’s a long way to go.

Although the numbers are lopsided, Brown said she’s never felt gender has played a role in how people view her or the work she does.

“It’s never been an issue in my district that people look askance or question, well a man would do anything different or vote, my peers on both sides of the aisle are very respectful,” Brown said. “It’s issue based. I find them all to be very respectful.”

After two years in the Senate, Brown wasn’t done, as she took a shot at Indiana’s 3rd District Congressional seat, which was being vacated by Marlin Stutzman when he made an unsuccessful attempt at Indiana Senator.

In a six-way Republican primary, Brown was one of three competitive candidates, although she ultimately finished behind now-Rep. Jim Banks and Kip Tom in the running.

In a political career that’s had alternating ups and downs, Brown doesn’t dote on the losses and instead focuses on what she can bring to the table right now.

So why aren’t there more women like Brown in elected offices at the state and local level? It’s still an ongoing disparity with no clear answers.

For Brown, she sees a few pieces in her experience that really opened doors to be successful in politics. First, is having a support system in place with family and friends, since running for office brings your life into the public like never before. Second, having community connections, people



who know and organizations that are familiar with your work and can build a network. And third, being strategic can be a big help. When Brown has run, she’s typically chosen to go after open seats instead of challenging incumbents and that kind of race levels the playing field among all candidates.

One other thing that Brown encourages women to recognize is that, every position is important and yes, every one has something to offer. You don’t need to be a lawyer or own a business or be a political operative to seek office.

That’s kind of the beauty of politics, is that the system benefits from having a diversity of backgrounds.

“I think all of those positions are of equal position and value, township trustees, wherever you want to start. You have to be confident there is no job description you fit when you run for office,” Brown said. “Their views and their backgrounds are extremely diverse and I think everyone has something to bring to value. I think you bring, whatever your background is, you bring a viewpoint that will be needed and important to any conversation.”



LOUIS WYATT

From the left, Rep. Phil GiaQuinta, D-Fort Wayne; Rep. Dave Abbott, R-Rome City; Sen. Dennis Kruse, R-Auburn; and Sen. Liz Brown, R-Fort Wayne, participated in a public education forum Jan. 9, 2020, at Carroll High School in Fort Wayne. Brown is one of 10 women serving in the Senate, along with 40 men.



# Party chair motivates others to serve

If everybody does just that little bit, you are moving a mountain in no time at all

BY SUE CARPENTER

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FORT WAYNE — Allen County Democratic Party Chair Misti Meehan considers herself an introvert, preferring to do the heavy lifting in the background.

"I always thought I would never be a candidate or this far up the food chain, so to speak, because I am usually the workhorse. I am usually the one you give a project to because you know it's going to get done."

She describes her entry into local politics as baptism by fire.

When presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' campaign came into town in 2016, Meehan was a super volunteer for the candidates. She, along with her French bulldog, Magoo, spent more time working to promote the candidates than for her full-time job.

Meehan attended both state and national Democratic conventions that year. Even though Sanders did not emerge as the party's candidate, he motivated the volunteers "not to leave, there is more work to be done."

So she stayed.

That fall, she attended the annual Indiana Democratic Editorial Association Convention in French Lick and joined the Allen County and Third Congressional District Democratic Party in December of 2016, and was soon elected secretary of both organizations.

Meehan moved up to chairwoman of the party in June 2017 following the exit of Mindy Rogers two months into a four-year term, a position she still retains.

Meehan says her whole life has been involved with politics. Her father was a union member at International Harvester while the plant was still in Fort Wayne.

"We always watched the State of the Union address, but it depended on who was speaking if we watched to the end," she said.

As a recent high school graduate in 1995, Meehan joined her dad at a rally in Indianapolis where some 20,000 people



challenged Right to Work legislation to have their voices heard.

"I was standing on the curb looking over everyone's heads and saw all the union markers. That was the most impressive thing in my life," she recalls.

Not ready to enter college after graduating from Fort Wayne Northrop, she opted to join the Indiana Army National Guard following graduation for six years as an automated logistical specialist, and reenlisting for two more years.

While choosing her major at IPFW, Dr. Andy Downs counseled her to seek a degree in political science, the basis for all of her interests because everything is based on legislation.

"I was considering workers' rights, health care, environment, wondering how can I make the biggest impact on the most things I care about," she said.

Downs also advised Meehan to seek jobs where she can leave work behind, because when getting into politics, there is a lot of volunteering, especially at the beginning.

"I had to ask, is that a sacrifice I am willing to make?" she said. She went to her employer who had watched her going to conventions and political activities. Even though they were mostly Republicans, Meehan said they respected what she had been doing. Staying active as

a volunteer required a flexible work schedule, and many jobs don't allow for political partisanship.

That motivated her to create her own business, Misti's Signature Services, that provides notary public and concierge services, "a fancy way to say I lend a hand when you need one," she said.

As a mobile loan signing agent, she travels to people's homes in Allen and surrounding counties to close or modify their loans, a job that requires acute attention to detail.

"It's not a Republican versus Democrat with the things that are going on now," she said of the current political climate.

"It is just a conservative area whether you are talking red or blue. I think, especially right now, sometimes it's not in your best interest to say your beliefs out loud. I think that is deterring the people. You just have to remind people that every vote really does count.

"We are in a tumultuous time. This year is unique to my experiences, to say the least," she said. "I understand the parties have different views, it's no difference in ideology when you get down to the core of it. I wept when (Sen. John) McCain died."

As chair, Meehan is responsible for fundraising and budgeting, and serves as spokesperson for the organization. She

also directs media relations, strategic communications and messages, as well as developing and executing strategies for all social media accounts, leading multiple monthly meetings, providing candidate and precinct committee person trainings, designing training and educational pieces for members and voters.

The phone at the headquarters has been ringing non-stop with people seeking information about how to get a yard sign, absentee ballot and when early voting begins. Others offer to help with poll watching, delivering signs and other services.

"It is the totality of your existence, I can't go places where people don't recognize me," she said of the job visibility. "I need to be available for media, I need that flexibility."

Later in the day, Meehan was scheduled to appear on a local television following the first presidential debate.

She takes pride that in 2018 they had the most Democratic candidates on ballot in a decade. "That was not by accident, we were looking put the word out there," she said.

Another duty is speaking at monthly breakfasts along with other meetings where she challenges attendees consider becoming candidates.

"Every single one of you in here has qualities that would be useful to an elected position. I don't care where you come from – because you have passion enough to show up at a meeting to find out what's going on in your community, and you have a background and an experience that would be beneficial," Meehan often includes in her message.

"I knew I had the skill sets that I could do those things, and I was fully aware this is like the best and worst volunteer opportunity all wrapped up into one.

"The best is meeting all the people who you would not have been exposed to otherwise, I like meeting new people, I like different people from different backgrounds, because it gives you a different way to think that you would not have come to on your own.

"The downside is you are giving a tremendous amount of all your resources and time for a volunteer position.

"I like seeing people getting elected into offices, I like seeing people participate who have not participated before," she said of recruiting candidates.

"And it is true with women, you have to be asked repeatedly. Generally, once just doesn't cut it," Meehan said.

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# ‘If you fall down, you get back up’

## Business developer shares philosophy

BY MATT GETTS

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FORT WAYNE — Her success is undeniable.

But that doesn't mean Barbara Johnson, 67, didn't endure her share of rough waters along the way.

Just as importantly, she has been able to share how she overcame her adversity with other women in business.

Raised in the South, Johnson came to Fort Wayne to work as an accountant at the former-Magnavox.

She worked at the company for 23 years and then was given a choice: Move with her position to Tennessee or stay in Fort Wayne.

With two young children, a husband who helped her and a love for her community, Johnson chose to stay and start her own business. And dozens upon dozens of women entrepreneurs are the better for it.

But it wasn't easy.

"It was a little nerve-wracking," she said. "It was a little scary. I was raised if you fall down, you get back up."

Armed with a partner and her own strong will, she started SheeKriStyle Academy of Dance on Parnell Avenue in 1999.

"My girls were good dancers," she said. "One was 6 and the other was 11."

Johnson had a leg up on many other entrepreneurs in that she had an accounting degree and her Master's in Business Administration.

She was also smart enough to ask for help at the newly formed Women's Enterprise, which operated under the umbrella of the federal Small Business Administration.

The goal of the Women's Enterprise was to foster women in business by offering resources and mentoring opportunities.



She went to Women's Enterprise.

"As I was being interviewed, I asked if they had a job," Johnson said.

In fact, Women's Enterprise did have an opening for a program manager, and with her resume, Johnson got the position.

"It was just coincidental," Johnson said. "But that coincidental worked."

For 12 years, Johnson worked at Women's Enterprise, mentoring and counseling other women who wanted to start their own businesses while simultaneously she was getting her own dance studio up and running.

The connections she made in her own dance studio through Women's Enterprise

were "phenomenal," she said.

Through her work at the organization, she helped other women make similar connections, including with financial resources at banks who were eager to aid the effort.

"There's a lot of help one can get," Johnson said. "There's dollars available to come with that help."

But that doesn't mean it's all going to be peaches and cream.

She said she advised women, "It's OK to be nervous. If you're not afraid, you haven't done your homework. You're jumping into something you haven't done before and it involves money."

Johnson lauded the Small Business Administration and the many corporate sponsors who helped marshal resources during her tenure at the organization.

She sees women in business today who are doing "miraculous" things, she said. "These women are sharp."

Meanwhile, her dance studio on Parnell Avenue was a hit, and in 2001, she expanded to include a second Fort Wayne location at 5740 Coventry Lane.

Eventually, she learned she had bitten off more than she could chew. In 2006, she closed the Parnell location and concentrated all her efforts at Coventry Lane.

The dance studio thrives at that location today.

Johnson encouraged women who want to start a business to have a good, solid business plan to start with. But she said they have to be willing to revisit it to make changes.

"It can pinpoint problem areas," Johnson said.

What other advice would she give to this generation of women entrepreneurs?

"I would tell them to look long and hard at location," she said. "Location, location, location. You can either sink or swim based on where you are."

And no matter, if you fall down, get back up.

"Just give it all you've got," Johnson said.

## MISTI MEEHAN

FROM PAGE 4

"A woman generally feels she must be 90% qualified for a job where man feels he must be 60% qualified," a stat told her by 2018 unsuccessful Dist. 3 U.S. Rep. candidate Courtney Tritch.

"I think until you stop and slow your

roll for a second, you don't really realize it," Meehan said. "That would never have occurred to me, until somebody actually says that kind of thing, it just gets you a little bit more apt to step outside your box. I am and always have been able to step outside the box, but a lot of people find comfort in a box and don't realize they're

in it," she said.

It doesn't make her mad at those reluctant to volunteer.

"That's comfortable. That's easy. It makes things easier. Life is hard. Volunteering is hard. Everything is hard.

"And you have to make sure you just keep in perspective that you are literally

changing the world. You register one person to vote — you are changing the world. You run for office. Even if you don't win, you are changing the world. Those are having impacts and every little bit counts. And if everybody does just that little bit, you are moving a mountain in no time," she said.



# Bowen-Slaven first northeastern Indiana county court judge

BY AMY OBERLIN

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LAGRANGE — LaGrange Superior Court Judge Lisa Bowen-Slaven is the first female county court judge in the four-county northeastern Indiana corner.

A Shipshewana native, Bowen-Slaven established a drug court through the LaGrange County court system that has helped men and women turn their lives around.

A Westview High School graduate, she earned bachelor's degrees in technical graphics and supervision technology from Purdue University in December 1989 and obtained a law degree from Valparaiso University School of Law in 1993. She practiced in Tippecanoe County as a part-time deputy public defender and in private practice in the law office of Marcel Katz until April 1997.

She married Steve Slaven in December 1994 and moved back to LaGrange County. She said she was glad to be close to her parents Steve and Sharon Bowen of Shipshewana and her husband, who works at Suburban Propane in Shipshewana, fell in love with LaGrange County's quaint atmosphere. Their sons Mitchell, 24, and Mason, 20, are now pursuing their own careers.

Bowen-Slaven started working for Beers Mallers Backs & Salin, based in Fort Wayne, in 1997, concentrating on family law in LaGrange and Fort Wayne.

"I did a little bit of everything," Bowen-Slaven said. "I learned a lot of municipal law and covered the meetings."

She thanked mentors that include Steve Adair, who introduced her to elder law.

"I learned so much from him," she said.

She opened her own law office in 2006 in the historic Brickhouse Inn in LaGrange, built in the 1880s and restored a couple of decades ago by the late Estella Carney.

"I never had any intention to run for judge," Bowen-Slaven admitted. However, through immersion in the bar association, she found a calling.

"My goal was to make the courtroom open and available," Bowen-Slaven said. "I firmly believe in due process."

All people, she said, should be treated alike and respectfully.

She was elected in 2014 and took office Jan. 1, 2015.

After seeing the positive effects of Noble County's drug court, Bowen-Slaven believed the program would benefit LaGrange County as well. In 2016, she assembled a team that included LaGrange County Prosecutor Greg Kenner, attorneys, public defenders, treatment providers, law enforcement and a pharmacist. After around nine months' planning, the first defendants entered LaGrange County Drug Court.

The Drug Court Advisory Team oversees the program, meeting weekly. Twenty-six people are currently going through LaGrange County Drug Court.

"It's treatment based. It's high accountability, intense supervision," said Bowen-Slaven. Through rewards and



AMY OBERLIN

**LaGrange Superior Court Judge Lisa Bowen-Slaven sits at the bench in the remodeled courtroom on the first floor of LaGrange County Courthouse.**

sanctions, people who plead guilty to substance-related crimes can earn their way out of jail and move toward a new beginning. The four-phase program lasts 18 months to three years, starting with an evaluation by an addictions expert.

The first phase is about honesty, said Bowen-Slaven. Participants must learn to change the thought processes that led them to substance abuse.

They are drug screened at least once a week and receive one-on-one counseling. They must get a job and do community service. They work with the LaGrange County Extension Office on budgeting, parenting and other life skills. They set goals and dream dreams.

"We have some really brilliant people in drug court ... from good families," said Bowen-Slaven. They range from a hard-working Amish-raised father to women who were codependent with men.

Since its inception in July 2017, 45 people have participated in LaGrange County's drug court program. While 24% were terminated, 75% either graduated or remain actively involved.

"We are very pleased with our success in such a short

time frame," Bowen-Slaven said.

The first graduation ceremony was held in August 2019. A third is planned in December if deemed safe from COVID-19 concerns.

"The coronavirus pandemic has been a struggle for our participants, as you can imagine, however, we are very proud of how they have persevered and have used the recovery strategies that they have learned in the program," said Bowen-Slaven.

The drug court opportunity brings people together. They bolster each other and learn from each other's trials and success.

"We unfortunately experienced a death of one of our participants in an automobile accident, which was devastating to all of us," said Bowen-Slaven.

Along with her heart for healing people through drug court, Bowen-Slaven wants to bring out the natural beauty of the LaGrange County Courthouse.

"It is a true gem," she said.

She's led efforts to restore some historic charm to the building, including replacing lighting and remodeling the Superior Courtroom to a more classic style.



# City engineer was always her career goal

BY ASHLEE HOOS

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ANGOLA — When Angola's City Engineer Amanda Cope first went to college after graduating from Angola High School, she was sure she wanted to be an architect.

Attending Ball State University as an architecture major and a member of the track and field team, she quickly found that architecture was a lot more right-brained than she had anticipated, something that her analytical, mathematically inclined left brain didn't love the way she'd hoped.

"Once I realized it wasn't for me, I switched my major into the business school," Cope said.

From that switch, she holds a bachelor's degree in finance. It's one of several degrees and licenses that Cope now holds.

After graduating, she spent a couple of years working in the finance sector before quickly realizing that it required a lot of cold-calling, something she isn't cut out for, and she knew it wasn't something she would do for the rest of her life.

It was time to come back to Angola to get that civil engineering degree her mom had told her back in high school she should really be pursuing instead of architecture.

"At age 24, I went back to school to study engineering," she said.

Looking back on her childhood, she said she was always analytical and enjoyed math classes and classes in engineering design. She was always the child playing with Legos, building things and enjoying being outdoors.

This time, she was pursuing her education at Tri-State University, now Trine University, in Angola. Once that was completed, she went onto completing a master's degree at Purdue University.

"I would have gone to school forever," said Cope. In total, she spent nine years in college.

Staying close to home has always been important to Cope, as she is a very family-oriented person. The Steuben County area is one she has always loved and she lives by the motto of family first.

"With the exception of college, I've always lived here," she said.

For awhile, Cope worked in Fort Wayne for a private consulting firm doing design projects. She commuted from Angola to Fort Wayne daily for the job for three years, until she finished her professional engineer licensing.

"I had always wanted to come back to Angola to work," she said.

When an opening came up in the wastewater treatment department, Cope



decided to apply and was hired in for the job. She made it very clear early on that her eventual goal was to become the city engineer.

"Engineer was always my goal," she said. "I really looked up to (past city engineer) Bill Boyer."

She jumped in with both feet once Boyer retired, as her first major project in the city was the East Maumee Street reconstruction project. Though difficult, Cope called it a great learning experience learning to deal with the public, businesses and coordinating the closure of a major roadway.

"It was horrible at the time, but it was great to start on," she said. "If I could do that, I knew I could do it all."

She was no stranger at that point to work for the city, though, as she'd done a few in-house design projects while working in the wastewater department. Those projects, she said, were rewarding to get to do because she got to put her stamp on them, making good use of the education she had worked long and hard on.

Cope has never lost that athletic side of her, as she has coached at Trine University since 2004 in the same track and field events she once competed in; shot put, discus and hammer throw.

"It was never in the original plans to coach," Cope said. "I was burnt out after college and thought I would be done with sports."

That changed when she was approached to help after a throwing coach had left mid-season. She was asked by some coaches at the university that she knew to help finish out that season.

"I really like it a lot," Cope said. "I like working with that 18-22 or so age group, seeing them work and develop."

Over the years, Cope said she's had some really top notch athletes come into the program and it's been fun and rewarding to watch them compete at that level.

"There's a lot to say for student athletes that want to compete and not get paid at all for it," she said. "You get invested and really want to see their success."

Student-athletes at Trine are not on scholarships, she said, so they are truly competing for the love of the sport.

She has also worked with local middle and high school aged girls that have considered pursuing throwing events.

"I try to be an advocate for them," she said. "I try to help those younger girls feel like they do have a place in throwing and that it's ok to do it, to put in the work."

Cope's words of advice for young women that want to pursue engineering or any other science, technology or math related career field is to go for it and never be afraid to be the only female in the group.

"It's ok, especially as you get older, because you won't be treated any different," she said. "If you enjoy it and put in the work, you will be successful at it."

She also encourages women interested in STEM careers to not hide their own voices.

"Be the outgoing, outspoken one," she said. It's not a negative."



# Nurse advances from bedside to board room

BY DAVE KURTZ

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LAGRANGE — It was easy, even at a young age, for Jordi Disler to see herself in a health care career.

It was harder to imagine how far it would take her.

Growing up in Fort Wayne in a family of health care providers, Disler said she knew she wanted to become a nurse by junior high school or even earlier.

Today, she serves as president of Parkview LaGrange Hospital, leading its 250 employees.

“It’s a testament to nursing when you can start out as an ICU nurse in the mid-’90s and end up being an administrator of a hospital,” Disler said. “I would have laughed at you if you would have told me that’s what I would have done when I was 20-something and a nurse at the bedside.”

Even as a grade-school student, Disler found herself drawn to classmates who needed an extra boost.

“My love of helping others turned into an opportunity for a career,” she said. She studied at Marian College at Indianapolis, then began her nursing career at St. Joseph and Lutheran hospitals in Fort Wayne.

While working as an emergency room and intensive care unit nurse, she took an opportunity to move into wound care at St. Joseph Hospital. Then she filled an open position for a wound care manager.

“I got into management and found that I really enjoyed that,” she said. “Helping employees and coworkers to their jobs better was what led me into management.”

Disler joined Parkview Health in 2001 to help open its north campus, which would grow into the sprawling Parkview Regional Medical Center.

“How often in your career will you be able to build a hospital?” Disler asked about her first experiences at Parkview.

“With the support of Parkview and the development of wonderful coworkers and leaders that had a lot of confidence in me to move and advance, you end up in places you never would have dreamed you could be,” she said.

In her first decade with Parkview, Disler served six years as clinical manager of orthopedic patient care and then four years as director of nursing and patient services for Parkview Ortho Hospital.

Disler earned a master’s degree at Indiana University-Purdue University in Fort Wayne, and when the position of vice president at Parkview LaGrange became available, that represented the next logical step in her advancement.

Arriving in LaGrange to interview for her next job, “I just felt like I was coming home when I walked in the front



PATRICK REDMOND

**Jordi Disler serves as president of Parkview LaGrange Hospital.**

door,” she said. With a welcoming staff and community, “I knew this could be a wonderful place to work and to make an impact.”

Disler served as vice president of patient care services at Parkview LaGrange for five years and moved up when the position of president became open in 2016.

Today, she said, “Most of what I do is to work on helping represent LaGrange County at the system level and develop our leadership team and our employees so they can provide extraordinary care for our community.

“There’s a lot of collaboration that I feel I’ve helped facilitate. ... bringing together leaders throughout the entire community to promote health and wellness.”

Parkview LaGrange offers programs in diabetes education and suicide prevention. Its Life Bridge program helps senior citizens adapt to the ever-changing stressors

of life in the senior years.

“Most recently, it’s, ‘How do we safely meet the needs throughout this pandemic?’” Disler said.

As a full-service hospital, Parkview LaGrange offers 25 inpatient beds, an eight-bed emergency room, full surgical suites and procedure rooms, all essential radiology equipment, cardiac rehabilitation, physical and occupational therapy, family birthing center, several negative-pressure rooms for meeting the needs of COVID-19 patients.

“We want this to be an extraordinary place to work and to receive care,” Disler said.

Disler credits the local community for supporting her and the hospital, and she returns the favor. She serves on the boards of Farmers State Bank and the LaGrange County Economic Development Corp. and is actively involved with the chamber of

commerce and community foundation.

“We are working with several groups to discuss child care needs in the community, to discuss housing needs in the community,” she said. “How do we better make LaGrange County a great place to live, work and play?”

When she’s not on the job, Disler enjoys traveling and being outside in nature with her husband, Chris, who owns a business in Fort Wayne. She loves reading and walking her dog, a Norwegian elkhound named Loki.

Disler also supports Youth For Christ in Allen and LaGrange counties and the Mustard Seed in Fort Wayne

She gives credit for her career success to her entire team.

“I can’t do what I do without such wonderful people supporting us,” she said. “They provide wonderful care to this community.”



# Howe's Marge Malone a founder of several nonprofits

BY PATRICK REDMOND

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HOWE — When Margaret Malone sees a need in her community, she works to fill those needs. It's just in her nature.

Throughout her time living in the small community of Howe, Malone has been responsible for founding nearly a half a dozen not-for-profit, community-based organizations aimed at solving a myriad of problems in Howe, and LaGrange County. From helping stray and lost animals to helping children move through the foster care system with less trauma, Malone has devoted her time and talents.

For those reasons and more, Malone has been named KPC's Influential Women of Northeast Indiana Nonprofit Woman of the Year. While grateful for the recognition, Malone said she did what she did only because those things needed to be done.

A Munster native, Malone, and her first husband first learned of LaGrange County in the early 1970s while on a trip to Ohio to visit a friend. LaGrange County made a biggest enough impression, the pair decided they wanted to move here and raise their family.

Since arriving, Malone has been operating her own small business, she served as the executive director for the Combined Community Action Committee. That organization led to the creation of the Clothes and Food Basket of LaGrange County.

Soon, she co-founded and launched an animal welfare organization, and then created and launched Ark Animal Rescue and Adoption. The organization now operates LaGrange County's no-kill animal shelter. To help fund Ark, Malone donated a large collection of books she owned and founded the Paws and Claw bookstore. That organization now occupies Howe's former grocery store and by buying and selling used books, helps support Ark. When she thought Howe could use a little help growing as a town, she called together a few friends, and over coffee and discussions, they created the Howe Community Association.

Now her latest creation, The Farm Place, Inc, an organization devoted to caring for children pulled into the courts and the foster care system through no fault of their own. The Farm Place started one Sunday morning in Malone's Howe home when she read a story in the News Sun about children being pulled into the foster care and the courts when their parents are arrested and charged with using methamphetamine. Sometimes, those children have to be housed at state institutions while child services professionals search a safe home for them. That part of the story weighed heavily on Malone.

In a moment she recalls with great clarity, a thought crossed her mind.

"You know how to solve this," she remembers, saying



it was God telling her to act. So Malone reached out to others and soon The Farm Place was born.

Key to its mission The Farm Place will provide a home for animals to interact with children in its care. Malone says she firmly believes animals are a valuable therapeutic tool that can help children overcome trauma. The Farm also will provide child services and healthcare professionals a nontraditional setting to work with and help children.

"People have asked me if I felt pride in all that I've done, and the answer would be a big no," she explained. "That would feel like 'Look what I've done.' I feel thankful when something is accomplished that needed to be done but that's it. As the old saying goes – I love it when a plan comes together."

Malone gives the credit for her accomplishments to God, saying God has placed her in situations created to help her acquire the talents and tools she needed to be able to respond to needs in her community.

"I think God prepares you for things that are going to happen in the future by bringing certain things into your life, certain knowledge, things that you're going to need later on," she added. "It's a huge thing to realize what He believes you're capable of."

Malone's own life has not been without challenges. Not long after moving to Howe, her first husband was diagnosed with cancer. He passed away five years later.

But while he was fighting that disease, Malone said did what she always does in these situations, read. She read books about everything related to her husband's cancer, looking to learn what she could do to help him. At one point, she worked four jobs at once just to provide for her family.

"I was able to call on my resources to get us through five years of treatments," she said. "I did things that I read in books. Books have always been a way of life for me. And it's because I had all these books I was able to start Paws and Claws bookstore, and it was all because I read."

That experience of dealing with the loss of her husband helped Malone gain a better understanding of the world around her.

"There really is a God who puts things in your mind," she said. "And I think the secret. When people ask how could you do this, I think at some point in time, I think God prepares you for things that are going to happen in the future that you're going to need later on."

Now in her 80s, Malone is slowing down, just a bit. Malone announced in September she was stepping away from the board of directors of The Farm Place and allowing others to see the mission forward. The board is now working to raise the money needed to complete Malone's dream, building a barn and conference center at the 10-acre The Farm Place property just north of LaGrange on S.R. 9.

Levi King, The Farm Place board of directors president said being named KPC's Influential Women of Northeast Indiana Nonprofit Woman of the Year is an honor Malone well deserves.

"She's just the kind of person who sees a need and does something about it. She's a woman of action," King said. "She goes to work and makes things happen. She's good at not taking no for an answer. She deserves this honor."

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# Early in role as health leader van Ee thrown a pandemic curve

BY MIKE MARTURELLO

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ANGOLA — When Alicia van Ee took over as chief environmental health specialist at the Steuben County Health Department, it would only be 18 months later that a pandemic would strike, dealing the world a blow that hasn't been seen in a century.

When the first cases started hitting the United States, it was right about the time that van Ee turned 30.

A few weeks after she celebrated three decades on earth, van Ee would be standing in the lobby of Angola City Hall with Cameron Memorial Community Hospital's chief of staff and other hospital officials, elected Angola and Steuben County officials and Steuben County Health Officer Dr. Ted Crisman, facing the assembled media to talk about how this community was going to do battle with COVID-19.

Just like when she goes before the Steuben County Board of Commissioners with proposals or stands at the dais to request funds from the Steuben County Council, she was cool as a cucumber. She laid out what her office would be doing as Steuben County health officials informed the public on how it was going to deal with this public health crisis.

Calm, unassuming and relatively soft spoken, this woman who came to Steuben County government to serve in one of the many important environmental health specialist roles was now in charge. She had to lead the health department and coordinate pandemic responses with numerous agencies in Steuben County.

There was a plan for that.

"It was called the pandemic influenza plan in relation to the avian bird flu and also to H1N1, so it kind of had a little bit of surveillance on both migratory birds and H1N1, but we took it and actually changed it and made it a pandemic, epidemic response plan. We just removed the influenza part of it and made it more generic because after looking at everything we did," van Ee said, "this plan was too particular to influenza."

Van Ee will admit as freely as perhaps anyone that no one expected a pandemic to hit the country the way in which it has. Her office is loaded with plan after plan to deal with public health crises. No one ever expects to happen, but this time, it did.

"I have plan after plan after plan after



MIKE MARTURELLO

**Alicia van Ee, chief environmental health specialist with the Steuben County Health Department, stands in the office in the Steuben Community Center.**

plan," van Ee said. "It's tedious but it's something we do to protect the community. We don't have a choice. It's something we have to look at."

As the pandemic approached and the Health Department pulled out its most applicable plan, not only was it too specific to flu, but the technology it employed was out of date. It talked about use of cassette tapes, for example.

"It was no longer applicable to what was going on," van Ee said.

For example, one of the directives dictated doing a radio broadcast. That's no longer effective, she said, when she could just as easily blast out emails to hundreds of people to get the word out about what was happening and the measures that the public needed to take in order to stay safe.

As it was coming down, as the novel coronavirus was starting to take hold in the United States, there was fear and uncertainty. As it unfolded and the Health Department and its partners went to work,

van Ee said, she learned that the Steuben County community was willing to listen, for the most part, and able to take as many measures as possible to stay healthy and limit the spread of COVID-19.

"I learned that we as a community are resilient. People are willing to listen at the local level, but when we have so much information that is being shared at the state and federal level it is really confusing," she said.

There were so many messages early on that the public was having a difficult time absorbing what was pertinent to them locally. There were hotspots and people were dying in droves, yet in Steuben County, early on, case counts were low and deaths were few.

Probably the most difficult task for the Health Department was getting personal protective equipment, even though it had built up a stockpile prior to the pandemic.

"We had to rely on the state of Indiana and the federal government to provide PPE

for us even though we had a stockpile," van Ee said.

That came from lessons learned from H1N1 when the county didn't have an abundance of PPE available.

"We actually had a stockpile that was considerable compared to what others had," she said. "We made it. It was concerning, it was scary a little bit in the beginning right before we shut down in March."

She was seeing shipments of PPE get diverted elsewhere when there was a need with local healthcare providers.

If nothing else, it pointed out how important it was to work together, to collaborate with others.

"We as a health department cannot exist by ourselves, we would never last. We need our leadership here at the county level, we need our leadership in our communities, we need our health partners, our health services, our mental health, our long-term care facilities. There were so many groups that had specialized needs," van Ee said. "We cannot be in charge of all of that so collaborating together and doing a pandemic response collectively with the emergency manager of our county (Randy Brown), made it so much easier, so much more detail oriented."

Through the Health Department and Steuben County Emergency Management the county was able to act as a clearing house for resources in the community.

"It was almost a barter system. I had never dealt with something like that before," van Ee said.

When government shut down, the Health Department continued working because of the pandemic, even though some workers were not involved and thus sent home.

Through it all, van Ee said, it brought the department together as a unit.

"We meshed very well," she said, giving her staff much credit for the department's ability to perform in the face of the pandemic.

Even though county government was shut down for the longest time, there many functions that were still being carried out. For example, builders were still active and needed letters of non-objection in order to be able to build a house.

Though you couldn't get into the Steuben Community Center, many different departments ended up receiving



# Leslee Hill aims to help women from inside-out

BY SARA BARKER

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FORT WAYNE — Advising women trying to start their own business is all about building confidence — something easier said than done.

Leslee Hill, program director at the Women's Entrepreneurial Opportunity Center, handles some day-to-day operations like social media and marketing and organizing speaker events, but her bread and butter is coaching women on how to run successful businesses.

"I want to be the best coach I can possibly be for these ladies," Hill said.

Knowing how to do the things on which Hill coaches her clients — like budgeting, scaling and feeling sure of themselves — has come from a background building a career in the fashion industry and gradually moving into consulting.

Hill has local ties. She graduated from Fremont High School and then later from Ball State University in 2001, finishing out her degree after moving to Chicago to work in product development and forecasting for Spiegel catalog.

Later, she moved to Colorado and primarily worked in design for knitwear before returning to Indiana to work at Vera Bradley in Fort Wayne.

Hill's time in the fashion industry led her to travel to places like Hong Kong several times and participate in multiple trade shows.

Coming back to Indiana at 25 meant a bit of settling down for Hill — not



something she was used to.

"It was probably harder for me to move here than it was to keep moving," she said.

When she started at Vera Bradley, which had about 150 employees then, Hill worked in the design department, and stayed for

eight years.

Working retail in high school, Hill said she fell in love with the glamour of the fashion industry. But by 2013, the industry was something she said she grew disillusioned with.

Hill said the industry as a whole — not any single company she's worked for — creates waste, sets up a toxic work environment and exploits the labor of the people who actually make garments.

Not to mention, the fashion industry itself can pressure women into having low self-confidence.

"How awful it is for humans, especially women, to be told you're not pretty enough if you don't have the right things," Hill said.

Either people enjoy the drama in the fashion industry, or they try to fix it, Hill said. So, she left Vera Bradley and struck out on her own to build women up.

That led her to becoming an image consultant, something Hill describes as enhancing someone's personal style so they feel better about themselves.

The next step for Hill, though, was to continue to scale — leading her to find her current role at the WEOC, coaching women, primarily.

"It's all the things that I love without making trash that ends up in the world," Hill said.

Now, Hill hopes she can be a good coach, wife, and mother to her two children, 11-year-old Sullivan and 8-year-old Hadley.

And aside from the women she coaches, her daughter Hadley has seemed to take after her, asking to draw up websites and develop them with her mom.

"I hope to God that I can make a huge difference," Hill said.

## ALICIA VAN EE

FROM PAGE 10

communication from the outside world through the tax payment drop box. Treasurer Missy Bixler would actually collect materials from the box then distribute the information throughout the Community Center.

Various communications with builders would be mailed out. Septic inspections still occurred. You just couldn't get into the Health Department.

"We were doing normal business as much as possible. We were also doing pandemic response as well from this department, so we tried to keep this area as safe as possible and everybody as healthy as possible," van Ee said.

Throughout the early going of the shutdown, when the Health Department was inundated with data and information from numerous sources, it was hectic, people didn't leave their desks and there were some tense moments.

To keep calm, van Ee would take walks to calm her nerves, even though she often appears to be on an even keel.

"Everyday I would get up and take a walk because the well being of the county; I'm very passionate about what I do and I don't want to fail anyone. I drive to succeed. That's just my nature."

She might freak out, she says, but she doesn't like it to show.

"A pandemic is not what you'd expect, 2020, you didn't expect it to happen, but it happened. Yeah, I freak out a lot, but I don't show that, because if I freak out then other people are going to freak out and that kind of energy just transfers forward," van Ee said.

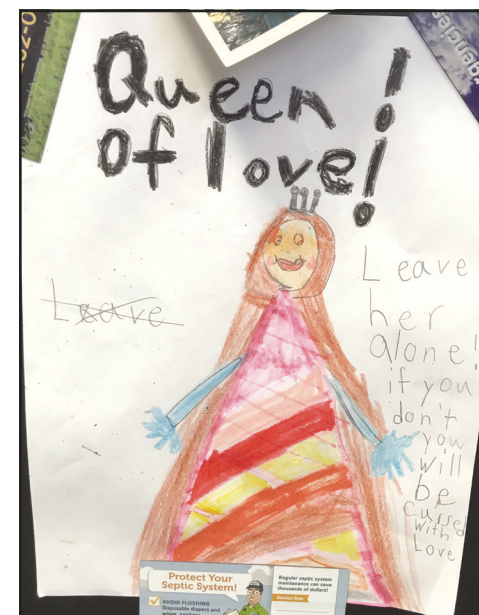
When she gives reports to, say, the Steuben County Board of Commissioners or the Board of Health, she tries to remain calm, give the facts as she knows them and let her audience come to their own conclusions.

Before joining the Steuben County Health Department in 2017, van Ee worked in a couple other positions outside of the health field. She was hired by former Chief Environmental Health Specialist Kris Thomas, to whom van Ee praises for preparing her to grow into the top slot in the Health Department.

Van Ee is a 2013 graduate of Western Michigan University where she earned bachelors degrees in geography and political science. Someday she might pursue a law degree or some other advanced degree.

This past summer, thanks to COVID-19, van Ee got to see her wedding dreams get dashed by the pandemic. Her bridal shower was spent hiking trails in southern Ohio.

Four days ago, van Ee was to marry. And while the planned ceremony was set aside due to the pandemic, she still was able to have her memorable big day, just scaled back a bit. OK, quite a bit.



MIKE MARTURELLO

A memento stands out in Alicia van Ee's office in the Steuben County Health Department.



# Owner's love of growing nurtures state's 3rd largest winery, vineyard

BY SHERYL PRENTICE

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LAOTTO — Jennifer Lutter, co-owner of Country Heritage Winery & Vineyard, said the business is the perfect combination of things she loves — agriculture and growing products, working with people, and continuing to learn about her industry.

Lutter was named an Influential Woman in the Indiana hospitality and tourism by KPC Media Group. The winery and vineyard is now the third largest in Indiana.

Jennifer Thrush Lutter grew up on her family's farm in DeKalb County, a few miles away from where the winery now stands. She was a 10-year 4-H member and soaked up a solid background in running a family farm from her parents.

A family farm is all hands on deck to get the work done. She operated tractors and machinery to plant and harvest crops alongside her family members.

"I love the outdoors. Fall is my favorite time of the year," she said.

Lutter graduated from Garrett High School and went into banking right after high school. She has been married to Jeremy Lutter for 23 years and they adopted a son, Brian, in 2001. Lutter left banking to be a stay-at-home mom, so the couple considered how to replace her banking income. They bought Blueberry Acres in 2001.

Lutter managed the blueberry farm and continued to help with the family's farming operations. She also took on bookkeeping for all the farm operations.

"My tractor had a buddy seat," she said. "Brian was always strapped in and riding along."

Ironically, Jennifer and Jeremy initially wanted to start a farmers market for locally grown produce. The blueberry farm was a step in that direction, but a need for bees to pollinate the blueberries introduced the couple to the winemaking industry in California.

"We needed bees for the blueberries," Jennifer said. "We shipped the bees to California for the winter for their survival in better weather. Then we sold berries to the wineries."

Jeremy visited some wineries when he went to California to care for the bees. The couple began several years of research into growing grapes, making wine, and the industry itself.

The Lutters added a second building for the farmers market and began adding



SUE CARPENTER

**Jennifer Lutter, a partner at Country Heritage Winery in LaOtto with her husband, Jeremy, shows a few of the varieties offered.**

produce, gourmet popcorn and deli meats and cheeses. Now however, the couple have closed the market to focus on the growth of the winery, which has expanded several times. The market building is available for event rentals.

The vineyard has planted 72 acres of grapes with plans to plant more. Lutter still finds time to run machinery when she takes a break from doing the winery's accounting.

"I just have a love of seeing things growing," Lutter said.

The pandemic has created challenges for the wine industry just as for other

industries, Lutter said. "The hardest part of the industry is to understand the regulations," she said.

Lutter sits on two industry boards, The Indiana Winery & Vineyard Association and the Indiana Wine & Grape Council. Both organizations work with lobbyists on regulation issues for the industry.

The perception of the wine industry in Indiana is changing.

"The industry is coming to Indiana from the West," Lutter said. "We now have 21-year-olds coming to the winery when they turn 21. Young people are appreciating the wine and want to learn more about it."

Lutter said she didn't drink wine before the winery was established.

"I love to learn," she said. "I learned so much about wine from others in the industry. I didn't drink wine until I started researching it. I learned it through the process."

Along with planting and growing more grapes, Lutter said the couple have other goals for the winery — more food options, producing more quality wines and providing excellent customer services.

And like the rows of grapes in the fields, the winery and vineyard will continue to grow.



# Being involved comes naturally for Moran-Townsend

BY JEFF JONES

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FORT WAYNE — Marilyn Moran-Townsend can't imagine not being involved in her community in some way, shape or form.

Moran-Townsend is part of the inaugural KPC Media Group's Influential Women of Northeast Indiana in the local marketing and media category.

In 1977, she and husband Bill were late news anchors at WKJG TV in Fort Wayne. In early 1981, she founded Custom Video Corporation, now known as CVC Communications — Business Storytellers, helping local and global corporations raise the skill levels of their employees through a variety of activities.

Additionally, Moran-Townsend has provided presentation coaching for corporate executives and some celebrities. She is a co-founder of AVOW: Advancing Voices of Women.

Being involved and being influential are both a privilege and responsibility, Moran-Townsend said.

"I always thought it was both a responsibility and a privilege that if you had been given opportunity, assets and gifts, you had a responsibility to use those to help others, not to just enrich yourself," she said.

"I see it as an opportunity because I often find, there are times when someone is needed to help move a project forward or bring people together."

At a United Way board meeting many years ago, she remembers receiving a report of what would be known as ALICE families (asset limited, income constrained, employed) that are above federal poverty levels but unable to sustain a bare minimum household budget.

"I left that meeting at 1:30 and went to a meeting at 4 o'clock of the executive committee of the Fort Wayne Chamber," she said. "On the agenda was a discussion about our chamber advocating for a company that wanted to move across the state line from Ohio to Fort Wayne and hire a bunch of people. The company provided no benefits and minimum-wage jobs.

"I was the only person in the room who was wearing both hats — the United Way hat and the Fort Wayne Chamber hat — and I got the group to recognize that we can be good people operating with great intention in our community, but we can be significantly harming another major effort in the community if we don't bring them together and think about consequences, impact, connections and synergy," she said.

"For years, I had often wondered why I got asked to serve on difference boards and committees that were rather disparate from each other," Moran-Townsend said. "That experience taught me that it gave me the opportunity to connect the dots when a lot of other people couldn't do that.

"That is something I see as an opportunity and also a responsibility to help groups think about what is best



overall for the community," she said. "I think it's helpful to think about how things will affect people in other walks of life, and to use your voice effectively to address it in a much more unified and collaborative way than a silo method."

The purpose of AVOW is to help women advance their voices "by understanding their skills, their capabilities, their connections and encouraging them to use their voices and recognize the value their voices bring," Moran-Townsend said.

One of her proudest moments came after picking up a local newspaper editorial section and reading three opinion columns written by AVOW women: one very strongly a Democrat, one very strongly a Republican and an 18-year-old Latina.

"The opportunity for each of those women to understand they have something important to say and to advance their voice is just thrilling," she stated.

In 2004, Moran-Townsend received the Sagamore of the Wabash Award in recognition of her contributions to the state and her community. In 2018, Moran-Townsend

and the three other founders of AVOW were named 2018 Citizens of the Year by the Journal Gazette.

She has received honors from the Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce, Indiana Chamber of Commerce, the United States Small Business Administration, a Paul Harris Fellow and recipient of the 2017 Community Service Award from the Rotary Club of Fort Wayne.

Like many individuals who so active in their communities, Moran-Townsend said her involvement was inspired by her parents.

"I often tell people that I work to feed my civic habits," Moran-Townsend said. "I didn't know there was any other path growing up because I came from a family where my parents were involved in virtually every civic endeavor in my small town in Oklahoma.

"From a very early age, I remember their having us involved as well," she said. "As they were getting ready to put on some event and they needed help folding invitations and stuffing envelopes, going to the meetings. ... both Mom and Dad were involved in everything, and they included us.

"It was so natural to me, and it was so instilled in all of us children how important it was to help your community and to be a civically involved and engaged citizen in your community, that it never occurred to me that most other people didn't have that upbringing.

"It was a real shock to me as a young adult to find out there were lots of people that weren't involved in anything," Moran-Townsend.

A letter from one of her daughter's friends is one of her cherished.

"A couple of years ago, I received a handwritten thank-you note from a young woman who is the age of my youngest daughter, and she was a good friend of my daughter growing up.

"She said, 'I just want to thank you for having taught me to say please and thank you.' She said, 'I now have two daughters, and I am teaching them the importance of saying please and thank you.

"At the time I would come over to your house, you would always remind me gently to add that to whatever I was requesting. I remember being kind of annoyed, but I am so grateful for having learned that lesson and now being able to share it with my kids."

"There have been a number of instances like that where people will send me a note, an email or something and comment on some interaction that we've had over the years, and it's just thrilling and always surprising.

"Everybody will tell you that they had no idea they had an influence like they did on somebody else's life," she said. "It's also a reminder that others are always watching us all of the time.

"It's also a lesson that my mom taught me," Moran-Townsend said. "She said, 'There's nothing more important that you own than your good name. Remember, it doesn't matter where you go, someone will see you.'"

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# FWMoA fundraiser stays approachable but focused

BY GARTH SNOW

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Ashley Stoneburner understands the art of advocating on behalf of the arts.

The vice president and chief development officer for Fort Wayne Museum of Art was chosen to represent the Arts category among the Influential Women of Northeast Indiana being honored by KPC Media Group.

"I believe what makes me successful as a fundraiser is being relational, tenacious and fearless," she said in an interview. "I strive to be approachable, friendly and mission-driven. I rarely know a stranger."

"I am very fortunate to work in an organization where leadership creates a culture where all ideas, opinions and perspectives are accepted," she continued. "FWMoA does not see male or female, but the person itself and their individual skill set. I aim to emphasize my best qualities to help advance the mission of the Fort Wayne Museum of Art."

Stoneburner joined the FWMoA in September 2015, as director of advancement and events. She said Museum President Charles A. Shepard III gave her an "awesome opportunity" by creating the position. "He saw something in me and he wanted to align our efforts," she said. She advanced to her current position in September 2019. In her five years at FWMoA she has helped grow the budget to over \$2 million in annual revenue.

She said the museum's board is very influential and important in the process.

"The museum is almost a hundred years old," she said. "Our donors are very loving and loyal and there is so much opportunity for cultivating and stewarding our donors. Charles has done a fabulous job and the museum is well respected and well loved."

She said the art museum is the only museum of its kind within a 90-mile radius. "We have a really strong membership base of 1,000 members and we do mailings and emails and lots of materials to advertise and promote what we're doing," she said. "We try to communicate and advocate and keep promoting what we're doing all the time."

"We're a very aesthetic organization, so with the exhibitions and the events and

plans we try to communicate that in a very visual way. We also do email blasts and phone calls. We have to make sure we're conscious of the expense and mindful of the constituency."

"We're anticipating a deficit this year as I'm sure many organizations are," she said. "During COVID-19 it's been decision paralysis and you try to navigate the best you can. You have to look at it from every angle. That's not a cookie cutter approach. That's not the same across the board. That's what I'm hearing from other development officials."

"So far organizations are being generous with their giving but we still have some time to go. We just started our fiscal year and everyone is so understanding of the place we're in. We're all in this together, so there's a lot of grace given when parties are rescheduled," she said.

Those decisions include weighing the cost of in-person events against the cost of virtual events. Traveling exhibits pose special obstacles during the pandemic. "Charles has grown the collection from 1,200 items to over 6,000 items and prepares us so we can do exhibitions with what we have," Stoneburner said.

"I'm such a collaborative person. I like to stay close to other professionals in the town. We share best practices and concerns and that only makes you a better professional," Stoneburner said. She serves as the board president of the Charitable Gift Planners of Northeast Indiana and as a board member for the Association of Fundraising Professionals Northeast Indiana Chapter and co-chair of the Program Committee. She earned her Certified Fund Raising Executive designation in June 2019.

Her development career started at the Muscular Dystrophy Association where she was a program coordinator for 2 years and then executive director for 7 years before joining the FWMoA in 2015. She supervised a team overseeing a \$1.5 million budget for health care programs and fundraising events.

In that role, she made an impression on families such as the Gilberts of northeast Fort Wayne. B.J. Gilbert and his wife,



Shannon, have three children. Zach is now 23. Mason is now 15. Both sons are battling muscular dystrophy. Their sister, Maddie, is now 16. Stoneburner worked with the Gilberts on MDA fundraisers. She was there when Mason joined the Fort Wayne Fire Department in a publicity photo for the Fill the Boot Campaign. She was also available to the Gilberts in less public ways.

"We'd call with anything or everything and any time we had questions she was right there helping out with any kind of medical stuff," B.J. said. "Anything she puts her heart into she puts her whole heart

into it. It's more than a job."

"I'll never forget what she did for my family," Gilbert said.

Stoneburner, a Fort Wayne native, grew up dancing at Northeast School of Dance and graduated from Carroll High School. She attended Hope College in Holland, Michigan, where she double majored in business management and dance. She is the youngest of three, with both brothers and parents nearby. Her significant other, Brian Bojrab, runs a trucking logistics company with his brother. In her free time, she teaches fitness classes at the YMCA and spends time with family and friends.

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# O'Connor raises the bar in Whitley County

BY NICOLE MINIER

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**COLUMBIA CITY** — Being a superintendent in a district of 3,500 students is no easy task.

Doing that in the middle of a pandemic — while trying to open a new, \$85 million high school — is remarkable.

Dr. Patricia O'Connor has been the superintendent at Whitley County Consolidated Schools for 11 years. In that time, she's accomplished much — surviving the financial crisis of 2010, opening Eagle Tech Academy, garnering community support for a new high school facility, and finishing up the years-long construction project during the coronavirus pandemic.

"It hasn't been boring, I'll tell you that," O'Connor said.

Superintendents before O'Connor were unable to achieve majority support for a new high school, a desire spanning 30 years of attempts at a new building. Most recently, a 2009 petition/remonstrance was shot down — right before O'Connor came to WCCS.

O'Connor began at WCCS as an assistant superintendent, coming from a similar position at a larger school district in South Bend.

A short time into her new job, O'Connor got some surprising news.

"I was here a couple of weeks and the superintendent announced she was leaving," O'Connor said.

Laura Huffman stepped down, and O'Connor offered to fill in as interim. About a month later, she took the position for good. Not long after, the economic crisis struck, and schools across the state took major cuts.

"I remember Tony Zickgraf and Jenny Grable coming in and telling me we would be millions out," O'Connor said. "We had to lay off teachers and other staff members. Not a thing was not touched or looked at. But we got through that."

O'Connor then moved on to one of her first big projects — opening Eagle Tech Academy, a New Tech school that is part of Columbia City High School.

The former Marshall Middle School was remodeled, and business partners from around the community helped to support the new venture, which had 100 students in its first year and eventually grew to 400.

"It's been fun to see it grow," O'Connor said.

The program was one of the first in the state, and one of about five in Indiana now.

Not long after, O'Connor directed her focus on the 1958 Columbia City High School building, which was considered an eyesore by many in the community.



FILE PHOTO

**WCCS Superintendent Dr. Patricia O'Connor was instrumental in moving forward with the district's \$85 million new high school project.**

"I'd taken lots of groups through our facilities. We are so proud of our beautiful middle school, our new and renovated elementary schools — and then take them to the high school and it was shameful. People wonder what's going on here?"

O'Connor heard from many in the community about the impact of the old building, such as realtors who were having trouble selling homes.

"We are a tremendous community full of great people. That building wasn't reflective of who we are. We had to raise the bar," she said.

However, also being a conservative community, many were not interested in tacking on more debt until old debts were paid off, which is why the 2009 initiative failed to pass.

"Our community wants to pay debts before taking on new debt. I have a respect for that and try to do that in my own household," O'Connor said.

So she staked out a plan, paying off some debts, meeting with community members and organizations, and seeking a boost from the Whitley County Redevelopment Commission to the tune of \$7.5 million in Tax Increment Funding dollars.

"We had debt falling off and a tax rate that would work finally. We had the support of so many entities that we didn't have before," O'Connor said.

With her ducks in a row, O'Connor used the support of the board to launch the campaign for a November 2015 referendum.

"The board has just been the wind beneath my wings. They've been very supportive and encouraging us to move forward," she said. "I can't tell you how grateful I am to work with such a board."

After the referendum passed, O'Connor, the board, staff members and members of the community took part in planning and designing the new school building, which spans 300,000, plus outbuildings and top-of-the-line sports facilities.

Construction began July 2017 and the school opened this August in the middle of the pandemic, putting a damper on some of O'Connor's plans.

She wanted to host a goodbye party at the 1958 building and a dedication ceremony at the new facility, both of which had to be canceled.

"I feel kind of incomplete," she said. "It put a big damper on things, but we are not alone."

The approval and eventual completion of the new school may not have happened without the influence of O'Connor, the right board members, and the support of particular community members.

"It's almost like divine intervention to come together at this moment in time to get this done for the community," O'Connor said. "The opportunity to be a part of this is beyond belief. I appreciate the opportunity to participate."

Though proud of what's been accomplished — at least for now — she's not looking to add another new school to her resume.

"It is a tremendous amount of work. One in a lifetime is enough," she said.

Fresh out of high school, O'Connor never could have predicted where her career would end up. She originally began college at Purdue University and later transferred to the University of Georgia, where she was a science major.

"I talked to the education department and I was so impressed," she said. "So I did, and it took every nickel I had and 2.5 years."

After graduation, O'Connor returned to Indiana where she was a teacher for 10 years. Her career then advanced to principal for 12 years, assistant superintendent for 10 years and now superintendent at WCCS.

"I've had the gift of some incredible mentors, or none of this would have occurred to me," O'Connor said.

In her first job at a private school in Elkhart, she was only three weeks in when she became the "unofficial" assistant principal, helping out the principal when she was out of the building.

"I was just trying to figure out how to teach," O'Connor said. "But I was able to move on that."

She earned her master's degree and administrator's license, and eventually took an assistant principal job in South Bend.

"I had a friend from South Bend give me an app, just wanting me to get my name in — another mentor," she said. "Low and behold, I got the job."

Similar to her experience at WCCS, shortly after her arrival in South Bend, her position changed.

"The principal I worked for came in and said he wanted to trade places with me," she said.

She took the reins during a stressful time for the school — it was under extensive renovations.

"The building was completely torn apart — everything from all the classrooms was piled in the gym," she said.

But O'Connor persevered, as she does, and ended up being the principal at Edison Middle School, where she attended as a child.

"It was a wonderful experience. I thought I'd never leave because I loved it. I loved everything about it," O'Connor said.

That all changed when she got a call from the superintendent, who asked her to leave the school to work on a curriculum project.

"When I was finished, I was supposed to go back to the school," she said. "Then she asked me to stay as assistant superintendent



# Paula Hughes-Schuh serves women through regional YWCA

BY KATHRYN BASSETT

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Paula Hughes-Schuh frames her life journey as “one of learning and growing to find a role that allows me to use both my heart and my head. And that’s what I really really appreciate about the job that I’m in right now, the role that I’m in,” she said.

Hughes-Schuh is the CEO of the YWCA of Northeast Indiana serving the counties of Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Noble, Wells and Whitley. She has served in that role since 2017. She is being honored at the Influential Women of Northeast Indiana Community Leader of the Year.

A graduate of Northrup High School, Hughes-Schuh moved to Fort Wayne when she was a sophomore in high school when her father retired from the Air Force.

“Previous to high school we moved around a lot,” she said.

Charting her journey to her current role, Hughes-Schuh said, “My undergraduate degree is in sociology and religious studies and I started as a social worker and learned very quickly that’s where my heart was, but I was actually too soft-hearted for it. I was too soft-hearted for direct care. But I discovered that I had skills on the administrative side. So from there I pursued positions and education that allowed me to work more and more in ... the business side of operations.”

“The first job that really clicked for me was when I ran the chamber of commerce in Decatur, Indiana. I was 25 years old. I was the president of the Chamber of Commerce and I just really enjoyed that



CONTRIBUTED

**Paula Hughes-Schuh is the CEO of the YWCA of Northeast Indiana. She is being honored at the Influential Women of Northeast Indiana Community Leader of the Year.**

linking together of business and community. That’s what fed my drive to be involved in politics. For me, being involved in local government was more about another way to serve the community, not about the politics,” Hughes-Schuh said.

She went on to obtain her MBA in management and marketing from the University of Saint Francis, graduating in 1999.

For eight years, from 2003 to 2010, she served as the second district elected representative on the Allen County Council and in 2011 was the Republican nominee for Fort Wayne mayor, losing in the election to Democrat and incumbent Tom Henry.

“After that ... I worked for private sector companies. I worked for a corporate finance company, and a private equity

company and really got to polish my business skills. I enjoyed that, but it didn’t fulfill my heart,” Hughes-Schuh said.

When the position of YWCA CEO came along, a friend of Hughes-Schuh reached out to her and encouraged her to apply, knowing that Hughes-Schuh has served on the YWCA’s board 15 years earlier.

“It happened very quickly. It was a great compliment to be invited to apply and I have really, really enjoyed this role ... It’s a great place to be in life where you feel that you know that your efforts every day are going toward a greater good and that I am using my whole person,” she said.

Reflecting on the work of the YWCA, Hughes-Schuh said the organization’s mission statement is “empowering women and eliminating racism.” It offers services in areas of opportunity, success and recovery.

The organization operates a 66-bed residential crisis shelter for survivors of domestic violence. In addition, 10 staff members work throughout the six-county region offering advocacy services, case management, and working with clients who aren’t in need of the shelter or who are no longer in the shelter, helping them restore their lives.

The YWCA offers education services to youth in middle and high schools on various topics on relationships and bullying and educates adults in their workplace on various domestic violence and racial justice topics. It offers recovery services at two campuses encompassing 50 beds, assisting women with addiction recovery as well as supporting children and their parents

while staying in the YWCA’s residential programs.

Outside of her role with the YWCA, Hughes-Schuh serves on numerous boards and committees and has served on more than 20 non-profit boards, she said. She focuses her volunteer activities in areas of community and economic development, social services and arts and culture.

Since 2013, she has served on the Ivy Tech State Board of Trustees, and was board chair in 2015-16 and 2018-19. She also serves on the board of United Way of Allen County and has been active at the state level with the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, helping reshape the way services are delivered to domestic violence survivors.

“My husband would say that I volunteer on boards for fun,” she said.

“I do, I volunteer for fun.”

She also enjoys doing things for and with her 16-year-old son, Beale, and husband, Larry, she said.

“I can’t imagine not doing what I do, contributing to society in some way,” Hughes-Schuh said.

“I’ve been blessed with some real gifts of administration and understanding of how business operations work and it brings so much joy to me to be able to use that in a way that goes beyond a profit and loss statement.”

Graduated from Northrup High School. But my father was career Air Force. Previous to high school we moved around a lot. Moved to Fort Wayne when I was a sophomore in high school when he retired from the Air Force.

## DR. PATRICIA O’CONNOR

FROM PAGE 15

of curriculum and instruction.”

When that superintendent stepped down, O’Connor sought out the job in Columbia City — a community she knew little about initially but grew to love.

“I was so happy I got the job. It was a highly valued job,” she said.

She’s appreciated working with a school board and staff that is so supportive, and she may not have been able to accomplish all she has without that support.

“I’ve always felt very welcomed and people have been very kind, fair, honest and supportive,” O’Connor said.

Early in O’Connor’s career, it wasn’t as common for women to hold more prominent positions.

“When I was a teacher, I applied for a chair position in the science department, and the principal didn’t know why I wanted

a position like this. When I applied for assistant superintendent in South Bend, they couldn’t imagine why I wanted to be in administration,” O’Connor said. “It was long enough ago that there were a lot of changes that needed to occur to have women in administrative positions. I guess I was part of that. There weren’t many female admins. If you were, you were a pioneer at the time.”

O’Connor said there has been much progress made in the education industry, which originally saw females as teachers, and “men were in charge.”

“I hardly ever think about it now. It seems like a non-issue,” O’Connor said. “We’re making a lot of progress as far as opportunities go, but there’s more work to be done. Look at the Senate, the House in every state and national position. Look at who the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are.”

Though the new school is up and running, O’Connor still has her hands full with the ongoing pandemic, which has changed much with her work style.

O’Connor’s personality lends to well-thought-out plans and preparation. During the pandemic, many plans were thrown out the window on a daily basis as the situation changed.

“I like to take time in making a plan, and once we do I don’t like changes,” O’Connor said. “I learned some flexibility.”

She typically compartmentalized her work depending on her physical location.

“Most of the time, when I’m home, I’m home. I’m doing the laundry, making dinner, doing all of that,” she said. “When I’m at the office, I don’t think about home. I’m all-in wherever I am, but not with this pandemic.”

“It’s 24/7 but you have to love it. I do. I love it. Do I love the stress? No. Do I

worry about things? Yes.”

Especially during the pandemic, where she could face a crisis at any moment.

“Doing all of this in a pandemic is very stressful,” she said. “I’m a phone call away every day from a crisis.”

With many irons in the fire at work, O’Connor doesn’t have a lot of free time for hobbies but does enjoy entertaining friends, reading books, reading newspapers, cooking and spending time with her husband, who also works long days.

Though she has no immediate plans of retiring, she does have some ideas of how she would like to spend her time after retirement — a “simple life.”

“When I retire the only thing I want to do is walk dogs and try to see my grandchildren as much as I can ... hang out with friends ... a very simple life,” O’Connor said.



# Tenacity led Butler to job as Riverfront program manager

BY CINDY LARSON

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Just seven years ago Megan Butler was a divorced mother of two young boys, working 29 hours a week for \$9.50 an hour. The three lived in a studio apartment downtown. "It hasn't been a very long time since that was my life," she said.

Tooday she is the Riverfront Fort Wayne/Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation program and events manager. She and her boys, now 8 and 9, live in a home in the West Central neighborhood. She spends a lot of time at the new Promenade Park downtown.

In December, Butler will graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science.

She is KPC Media's choice as Influential Women of Northeast Indiana in the category of Economic Development.

Butler said she was "shocked, excited and grateful" for the award. She also was named one of Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly's 40 under 40 in 2019.

Growing up, life was not easy for Butler and her family. "I grew up very, very, very poor," she said. Raised by a single mom, at times they were homeless. "I grew up all over northeast Indiana because we were so poor we moved a lot," she said.

She loved to read, but because they were poor they never had books in the house. That didn't stop Butler, however. "I actually taught myself to read reading the Readers Digest."

Despite her experience growing up, she doesn't point blame at her mom for the circumstances of their life. "She grew up in rough circumstances," Butler said. "She didn't have many coping mechanisms."

But the No. 1 thing she learned from her mother, who died two years ago, was her extreme work ethic. It taught Butler self-reliance and resourcefulness. "I would not give up that experience," she said.

Butler went to Northrup High School and says she is a "very, very proud Fort Wayne Community Schools graduate."

In school she was a competitive debater. She says she "absolutely lived for it." At her first competition, she came in dead last. "By the end of my senior year I was ranked third in the state. And that was through sheer will."

Competitive debating was a good fit for her. "I get bored quickly, and so I need new challenges, constant challenges."

Butler describes herself as "a very achievement-oriented person. So I'm not really a money-driven person or a prestige-driven person. I really like to accomplish difficult tasks. And I have a definite competitive streak."

Her work history has shown how she's developed the skills that got her



ANDY BARRAND

**Megan Butler, program and events manager for Riverfront Fort Wayne, has been recognized as one of KPC Media's Influential Women of Northeast Indiana. She is being recognized for the IN Economic Development award.**

to where she is today. She was a visitor services specialist at Visit Fort Wayne from 2013-2015 where she greeted and helped visitors and planned and assisted in Visitors Center events. From there she went to work as events manager for the Downtown Improvement District. Then she spent a years as adult programming and volunteer coordinator at the Foellinger-Freimann Botanical Conservatory.

In 2017 she was hired for her current job, despite not having finished her degree yet. In fact, she was competing with people who had master's degrees. When she asked why she was hired for the job, the people who hired her said it was because she had the strongest communication skills and strongest communi-

ty-building skills.

Riverfront has been a good fit for her because it is new and growing, providing opportunities for Butler and her staff to be creative with new ideas.

"Every year there are new challenges and obviously this year we had COVID, so that was a whole new slate of challenges to adjust to," she said. The rapidly changing situation required Butler and her staff to keep coming up with new plans to keep people safe.. "We could not have survived this year if I didn't have that team working every single day to come up with new approaches, new ideas and have the bravery to try new things even though we risked failure."

She advocates for Riverfront to try new things, rather than do things the way

they've always been done. "There's room for tradition, there's room for history, but there's also room for innovation and experimentation. I think we all feel like as hard as this year was, it really made us better prepared going forward. We're more innovative. We're more forward-thinking, (more) able to handle crises."

Almost every day Butler is at Promenade Park. Her duties include overseeing events, rentals, and "a good chunk of operational duties."

It keeps her busy. "It's not a 40-hour a week job. Not even close."

You won't hear her griping about it, though. "My two loves in my life are Riverfront and my children," she said. "My boys spend a lot of time at the park. It's an interesting life. I wouldn't trade it."



# Sara Ayres continuing her father's legacy

BY LOUIS WYATT

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Sara Ayres has been at the helm of Don Ayres Honda for nearly a decade, but she's been a presence at the dealership since early childhood, after her father — whose name the company bears — started the 50-year-old business as a Pontiac dealership in 1970.

"As a child, of course I spent a lot of time around the dealership, and would even go in as a really small child to help my dad plow snow in the very early years," Ayres, the company's president since 2011, said.

When Ayres was old enough to drive, her dad put her to work during summers — first helping around the office, then working in the service department, selling cars while on summer break from college, and working as a service advisor between her two years of graduate school.

Ayres says she most likely made the decision to put the business at the center of her future professional life toward her final years at Concordia Lutheran High School in Fort Wayne. She went on to earn her undergraduate degree from Duke University in 1994, before earning her master's in management from Purdue University's Krannert School of Management, with the intention of bringing her expertise to her father's business in Fort Wayne. She went

on to attend the NADA Dealer Candidate Academy and started full-time at Don Ayres in 1996.

Her father, Don Ayres, was involved in the business for more than 40 years until 2012, while his wife, Sandy, ran the office in the '70s and '80s. Don Ayres passed away in 2019, aged 76, due to complications from Lewy body dementia and Parkinson's disease. Still, his legacy lives on in his business. This year, Fort Wayne Mayor Tom Henry declared Sept. 24 Don Ayres Day in honor of the company's 50th anniversary.

"It's amazing that this business has been able to flourish this long. Our Honda location is in its original location, and it's still a wonderful, busy, viable place to do business. And I wish my dad were here to celebrate with me," Ayres said.

Sara Ayres was Don Ayres' only child to get involved in the business. However, her husband, Mike Craig, runs the company's new Acura dealership on Illinois Road, which Don Ayres Honda acquired in December 2019.

"Cars are really exciting — they're always changing and pushing the technology envelope, there are always new trends," she said. "Transportation is something we all need, so I really enjoy being in a business that sells and services vehicles."

Ayres is one of just two women who own car dealerships in Fort Wayne, including Jane DeHaven, dealer operator and owner of Summit City Chevrolet. She considers even that to be an uncharacteristically high number for the industry.

"It's somewhat unusual to have two in one city," she said. "While we have several really wonderful women working in our organization, there's always room for more, and I would love to see more get involved in this business because it has great opportunities for both men and women."

"We have many departments within this one business. You have people on the technical side, the service end of it, to sales people, accounting staff, parts people, people who detail cars. We just have a great variety of amazing, loyal people — many of whom are long-time employees. My favorite thing about it is getting to lead so many amazing people who are leaders themselves."

Being involved in the community is something the business takes seriously as well, she said. Her father was known for supporting many causes throughout the Fort Wayne area, including his work with the Don Ayres Little League baseball program.

"As leaders, that's something we take as an obligation," she said.



## 3 ways women can build and maintain professional networks

BY METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Established professionals often tout the importance of building strong networks. In fact, a 2017 global survey from LinkedIn found that nearly 80 percent of professionals consider professional networking to be important to their career success.

Professionals may see networking as a great way to land their next job, but establishing strong networks can pay dividends even for those people who have no immediate plans to leave their current companies. Small Business BC, a resource that caters to entrepreneurs in British Columbia, notes that successful networking can lead to referrals and new partnerships and raise the profiles of professionals and the companies they work for. The LinkedIn survey supports that notion, noting that one-quarter of professionals across the globe have established new business partnerships through LinkedIn Messaging. Of course, networking often helps people find new jobs as well, as the LinkedIn survey also found that 70 percent of people

hired in 2016 found work at companies where they had existing connections.

Women can employ various strategies to build strong networks and maintain those networks once connections are established.

1. Join professional organizations.

Professional organizations provide great networking opportunities, serving as avenues to begin new business relationships. Many such organizations host annual conferences, and attending these conferences can help women maintain the relationships they develop through their participation in these groups. That's an important benefit, as the LinkedIn survey found that 38 percent of professionals admitted they find it hard to stay in touch with their network.

2. Offer help as much as you seek it.

The LinkedIn survey found that only 48 percent of professionals keep in touch with their networks when things are going well in their career. By reaching out to a network when things are going well, women are showing a willingness to offer



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

**Women can employ various strategies to build strong networks and maintain those networks once connections are established.**

help as much as seek it. That can lead to stronger, more easily maintained networks.

3. Schedule networking each week.

Build networking into your weekly schedule. Even the busiest professionals can find time each week to email someone in their network to see how things are

going or share updates on previous collaborations. That's a quick and easy way to maintain connections.

The value of networking is undeniable. Women can take various steps to build strong networks and maintain those relationships for years to come.



# How women can make their way in male-dominated fields

## BY METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Women have made great strides in various industries over the first two decades of the 21st century. Highly publicized pursuits of gender equality, such as the ongoing gender discrimination lawsuit by the United States Women's National Team against the U.S. Soccer Federation, have done much to further the cause for women in a great number of industries. But the fight for equality is far from over, as evidenced by the array of fields that remain predominantly male.

In 2017, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics tracked the percentages of women in a variety of professions, ultimately finding that many professions are male-dominated. For example, the BLS

found that only 20 percent of software developers were female, while roughly 63 percent of financial analysts are male. Each of those fields can be lucrative, suggesting women can benefit greatly from making inroads into these professions and others in which they are underrepresented.

Women may face an uphill battle as they look to establish themselves and subsequently thrive in male-dominated fields. That challenge can be overcome by employing various strategies.

- Build your network. Networking is essential for modern professionals. According to a global survey of nearly 16,000 LinkedIn members across 17 countries, 79 percent of professionals agree that networking is valuable for

career progression. Networking also can make it easier for women to thrive in male-dominated fields, as they can seek advice from professional colleagues, male and female, about hurdles they can expect. In addition, professional networks can serve as support networks as well. That can be invaluable as women face the challenge of establishing themselves in male-dominated fields.

- Work with professional women's organizations. Many professional organizations now cater exclusively to women within certain professions. Working with these groups places women in direct contact with peers with varying levels of experience. That means women will have access to people who have faced and

overcome challenges at various phases of their careers.

- Work with your employer. Wage gaps have narrowed in many professions, but that's not the only way industries have become more accommodating to women. Many businesses now recognize the need to change not just their pay structures, but also their working environments to make them more accommodating to women. Women who encounter problems at work, such as routine resistance to their ideas and input, should discuss such frustrations with their employers.

Women working in male-dominated fields face many challenges. But such challenges can be overcome in various ways.

# How women can handle reentering the workforce

## BY METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Dual-income families became the new normal in recent decades. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 63 percent of married-couple families had both parents employed in 2018. The same trend emerged in Canada, where the Labour Force Survey from Statistics Canada found that the number of Canadian families with two employed parents nearly doubled between 1976 and 2015.

Couples in dual income households have difficult decisions to make when starting families. Women who want to take time away from their careers to raise children no doubt recognize the long-term effects that such a decision may have on their careers. Researchers behind the "Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research" report released in October 2018 found that women who leave the workforce at age 31 and do not reenter it for five years can expect to earn 20 percent less over their lifetimes than male counterparts who never left the workforce. That's a significant loss in earning potential, but one that millions of women accept each year.

Reentering the workforce after a long period of not working is a challenge, but it's one that women can overcome with the help of a handful of strategies.

- Get a head start. Fair or not and intentionally or not, prospective employers may attach a stigma to applicants who have not worked in several years. There's no guaranteed way to clear that hurdle, but volunteering or interning in your field and/or taking a course at a local college before you begin your job search can serve as something of a head start. This can be a great way to dust off old skills and learn about any changes within the industry that

took place during your hiatus.

- Deemphasize chronology on your résumé. The online job bank Monster.com recommends using your résumé to highlight your skills and accomplishments instead of your dates of employment. This shifts the focus away from your time out of the field and toward your experience and previous successes.

- Get in touch with your network. Many professionals advance their careers with the help of a strong network of fellow professionals. So it makes sense to contact this network when you're reentering the workforce. Former colleagues can be great sources regarding job openings and changes in the industry that might have taken place while you were out of the loop. Reach out

to them and let them know you're ready to reenter the workforce.

- Consider part-time work. If a full-time offer is not materializing, consider part-time work. Part-time work will bring some money into the household, let you ease back into working and give you a chance to add

some recent experience to your résumé. And part-time jobs may ultimately lead to offers for full-time work.

Reentering the workforce after time away is a challenge, but it's one women can overcome with perseverance and some savvy strategies.



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**Reentering the workforce after a long period of not working is a challenge, but it's one that women can overcome with the help of a handful of strategies.**

# THANK YOU



**SARA AYRES**

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