

Working toward progress

Local women business owners organize for mentoring, education and business growth

BY CHARITY THOMPSON | of the VBJ

Women have come a long way in securing their place in the business community. The number of women-owned businesses is rising rapidly – twice as fast as other groups.

But even in success, these entrepreneurs face unique challenges, and women are continuing to organize locally to learn from each other and continue gaining ground.

The first chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners in the Pacific

Northwest is in the midst of forming, and a new group of women business owners in Skamania County began meeting in March.

Education over networking

Valerie Reamer, owner and CEO of Vancouver-based



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Gekkotek, is co-president of the NAWBO Northwest chapter with Shelah Johnson, CEO of Portland-based Techchex.

Reamer helped start the local chapter after researching

possibilities for the Vancouver-Portland

metro area for 18 months. As the head of a company in the male-dominated technical consulting industry, she wanted to create a network for women that benefits them as business owners.

“There is so much we can learn from each other,” Reamer said. “What holds us back is our inability to look weak or ask for help.”

The group’s focus is on educational leadership rather than networking, said Monica Harris, a chapter member and Gekkotek’s director of marketing. She also co-owns Two Shooting Chix Photography in Vancouver.

The organization will meet monthly and host business leadership speakers with regular opportunities for mentoring and webinars. Reamer also wants to see the group mentor high school and college students interested in business.

“There’s so much we could teach young women” she said. “I spent more time learning to sew a pillow in school than to do math.”

The organization also will be politically active, advocating for women business owners in areas such as health care, tax treatment and human resources.

Top sectors for women-owned businesses

Services: 69 percent

Retail trade: 14.4 percent

Real estate and rental licensing: 7.7 percent

Finance and insurance: 2.6 percent

Wholesale trade: 2.4 percent

Source: Center for Women’s Business Research

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"I'm frustrated politically," Reamer said. "There are so many decisions men make that have a definitive impact on my business. I want a voice – I want a big voice."

Strength in numbers

In Stevenson, Margaret Aris, owner of Skamania Physical Therapy, started a group for women business owners with Ellen Jenson, a financial services professional at New York Life in Stevenson. The town's business community is small, but women business owners are its clear majority.

"There aren't a lot of jobs in this community," Aris said. "A lot of women don't want to commute, especially if they've got kids and family."

The group's format is discussion-based, but she said workshops on topics like taxes and marketing could be in its future.

Meeting apart from men makes it easier for women to share about challenges they face, Aris said.

"It's nice to have a safe place where you can talk about some of your worries," she said. "We have to look so strong in business."

Aris, who is in her 50s, said owning a business was something she only recently considered.

"The challenges for women owning and starting a business today are nothing like what they used to be," Aris said.

Women in their 20s and 30s seem more fearless in business, she observed.

"I think it's an idea you grow up with," Aris said. "A lot of our moms (in my generation) never worked outside the home."

Closing the gap

Patti Serrano has seen the strides women have made in business first hand as the lone woman on Clark College's full-time business faculty.

The number of women-owned businesses has more than tripled nationwide since 1980, from 3 million to 10.5 million, Serrano said. At Clark College and beyond, she sees more women opening businesses in accounting, tax preparation and auditing.

In Washington, Serrano said, women also are gaining in real estate, accounting, finance and

banking, technology and law.

But the playing field isn't equal yet. Women earn 25 percent less than men in nearly every sector, she said.

"We still are lagging behind, and over a lifetime, that's thousands of dollars for a woman," Serrano said.

One factor in the disparity is that women are more likely to take career breaks to raise children. In fact, women without children earn slightly more than mothers, she said.

Women-owned businesses also are earning less than their counterparts. Just 3 percent reach the \$1-million mark compared to 6 percent of male-owned businesses, according to the Center for Women's Business Research in Washington, D.C.

Serrano said that's likely because women often choose less

lucrative industries.

"A lot of men still tend to go into high capital industries while women go into service industries," she said.

While small service-sector businesses can be lucrative, Lori Lindsell has seen women earn more with less typical ventures such as paper converting, semi-truck sales and veterinary care. Lindsell is a department vice president for business lending at Vancouver-based Columbia Credit Union.

"I've seen the whole spectrum of businesses that are women-owned," said Coletta Bruce, her counterpart at CCU. "But if you're going to have a micro-business, it's going to be micro no matter what your gender is."

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