

Women at the top of their game

November 14, 2016 12:00 PM Leslie Carde
tulaneimag@tulane.edu



Seven powerful Tulane women graduates change the way the world works, overcoming obstacles and opening up opportunities in the fields of business, philanthropy, basketball, credit, health care, women-led organizations, equal rights and bridge.

Chroniclers of history may proclaim 2016 as the Year of the Woman, largely because it was the first time in history that a woman was a major political party's nominee for president of the United States. However, it should be duly noted that 96 years after females won the right to vote, it's taken generations of women making slow but steady headway against a well-entrenched male-dominated system, to attain what

many consider to be, at the very least, a psychologically game-changing ascension.

Beyond an inherent drive and ambition, every one of the trailblazers you're about to meet has altered substantively the way women are perceived ... in the banks, in the boardroom and beyond. Gender discrimination, although a central theme and common denominator, has never been a deterrent for these women, but rather has served as the motivating force and the overriding impetus for implementing change.

BUSINESS ACUMEN

For [Carol Lavin Bernick \(NC '74\)](#), her loving father was the first to question his daughter's ambition to become part of the family-run business at Alberto-Culver. Bernick had hit the ground running in her quest to find a job, after graduating from Tulane with a degree in sociology. "I had gotten an offer from Bristol-Myers in marketing, but decided I wanted to work for my parents' company. So, unbeknownst to my folks, I applied for a junior-level marketing assistant's position, and was hired. My Dad initially tried to discourage me, as he didn't want me to become tough, but within six months, I had developed Static Guard." Static Guard took the company in a different direction, by laying the groundwork for a number of other innovative household products. Up to this point, the company's mainstay had been VO5 hairdressing, a leading beauty product. Now, Bernick was creating trendsetters in the household division ... Mrs. Dash, Molly McButter, and Baker's Joy, jointly improving the company's bottom line.

With a slew of successes under her belt, Bernick moved on to increasingly challenging management positions, and in a move that garnered her national publicity, radically overhauled the company's corporate culture, increasing morale and cutting turnover in half.

"This involved a targeted process of turning our employees into maximum contributors, requiring that they think as businesspeople ... making sure they understood the company's goals, and were tuned in to how best to implement them, no matter what their particular job."

Thirty years from the time Bernick began at Alberto-Culver, and a lifetime of achievements later, she became executive chairman of the company. She spun off the company's Sally Beauty unit, the largest retailer of professional beauty products, from its consumer products division. And, in 2011, she orchestrated the sale of Alberto-Culver to Unilever, PLC.

Now the CEO of Polished Nickel Capital Management, a privately held company, managing diversified investments, Bernick has straddled the heights of the corporate world while raising three successful children. This, above all, she considers to be her shining achievement.

“My goal was to raise kind, caring, competent children. I worked 4 miles from the company headquarters, because it was important to be near my kids.”

In fact, while Bernick was still at Alberto-Culver, she was named “Working Mother of the Year” by the *Moms in Business Network*. And since leaving the Chicago-based Fortune 500 company, her philanthropic work in both New Orleans, post-Katrina, and in Chicago, has been legendary. She recently completed two terms as chair of Northwestern Memorial Healthcare in the Windy City.

Now with six grandchildren under age 2, Bernick is always looking for the next challenge. In fact, she’s creating a charity that will be an educational resource center.

“And I’m also talking about writing a book. It’ll be 500 little bullet points about things I’ve learned during my crazy life. Tips for the next generation to weather the storms of their own lives and learn from my experiences.”

BASKETBALL DREAMS

[Janell Burse \(UC '01\)](#) was already 6 feet, 2 inches tall and a proficient basketball player by age 14. When she graduated from Tulane, she was 6 feet, 5 inches, with an athletic scholarship under her belt. Her stellar college career as an All-American led her to be drafted in 2001 by the Minnesota Lynx, part of the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA). Traded to the Seattle Storm in 2004, she retained her status as a starter, and as the team’s center, helped them win the 2004 WNBA title.

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the levees broke, and the Big Easy became a big disaster.

“The house I grew up in, in the Lower Ninth Ward, was totally destroyed. I became the face of Katrina relief. We raised \$100,000 for those in need.”

Early on, Burse realized the dearth of opportunities for female basketball players who wanted to turn pro. Unlike their male counterparts, whose opportunities were

abounding with multiple leagues and farm teams, female college players were relegated to opportunities in only one league, with only 12 teams, compared with the NBA's 30.

"In 2011, when I left professional basketball, I wanted to make a difference in the lives of the athletes who were approaching that turning point in their lives, where they would either get picked up by the WNBA, or be forced into something else entirely as a career."

In 2015, the WMLBA (Women's Minor League Basketball Association) was founded. Burse is the association's first commissioner. It's been the perfect storm of experience meets opportunity.

"I have the training and experience to know which girls have potential to get into the WNBA, or the European leagues, while they're getting great training. I'm so passionate about my job. I'm all about empowering women and supplying opportunities, so their dreams last a bit longer. That's exciting!"

CREDIT CARD

We can all thank [Emily Card \(NC '63, G '66\)](#) for the fact that women are able to obtain credit. Believe it or not, prior to 1974, women could be denied credit based on gender. Card helped draft legislation preventing that form of discrimination.

After she earned a PhD from Columbia University, Card was given an opportunity to do a fellowship under then U.S. Sen. Bill Brock. (Later, Card received a master of public administration from Harvard University and a JD from the University of California.) The alliance with Brock was fortuitous, as he was on the Commission for Consumer Credit and the Senate Banking Committee, and Card was about to have her feathers severely ruffled at her neighborhood bank.

"I had applied for a BankAmericard years earlier while living in California," said Card, "and was told that my husband had to apply for the card, even though I was the breadwinner. Later, I wanted to buy a house on my own, but I was denied a mortgage because I was a woman. That time I hired a lawyer, and the bank acquiesced.

"When I moved to Washington, D.C., and I went to open a checking account; ironically, there was a big sign on the bank wall, which pronounced that no one

could be discriminated against based on race, religion, or creed ... but it didn't mention on the basis of sex."

Card had a conversation with Brock, who told her that if she could show him why there should be a federal mandate, he would consider bringing it to the Senate. Card began her quest to gather evidence and documented her findings of years of gender-based discrimination in a 25-page report. The senator was convinced, and it started the ball rolling on the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA).

"To get this bill through the Senate was absolutely amazing, because there were no female senators back then. The antiquated thinking was that if you were married, you could become divorced, and if you weren't married, you were unstable. If you were a widow, you were viewed as helpless and in need of rescue. One woman was made to sign an agreement that stated if she were to become pregnant, she would have an abortion. After all, how could anyone be a good credit risk if they were also a mother?"

Card pushed women's rights light years ahead. Her complete notes on the passage of this landmark bill are now part of the permanent archives at the Newcomb College Institute, along with her book *Staying Solvent*, which includes the story of the ECOA. Card has written or co-written seven books.

SAVING LIVES

For the girl who grew up watching "St. Elsewhere," it's no surprise that [Dr. Karen DeSalvo \(M '92, PHTM '92\)](#) became a physician.

Wait-listed at Tulane University's School of Medicine, back in 1988, someone finally decided to give her a chance. While in medical school, she did field work, set health policy and realized she wanted to work permanently in the public health sector. After doing a fellowship at Harvard University, DeSalvo returned to New Orleans as a professor in the schools of Medicine and Public Health and Tropical Medicine. Then came Hurricane Katrina, putting her clinical knowledge to the ultimate test ... the streets.

"We were building our wings, after we jumped off the cliff," said DeSalvo. "It was stressful, as so many people had lost everything. The clinics were being staffed largely by volunteers, and it was a race against the clock. The city was under martial law, and one of the community clinics we started was in a boys' dorm. It wasn't

handicapped accessible so we used the downstairs. There were people living upstairs, even a dog. It was all makeshift, but it was about saving lives.”

Her ideas were transformative, so much so that Mayor Mitch Landrieu, in 2011, tapped her to be his new health commissioner for the city of New Orleans, structuring an entire network of community health clinics.

Currently, in her position as acting assistant secretary for health, and the national coordinator for health information technology at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C., she deals with problems on an even larger scale. She’s implementing better preventive medicine, the critical sharing of information through databases, and she’s tackling the broader determinants of health: infant mortality, neighborhood violence and obesity. Throw into that mix emerging pathogens, antibiotic-resistant superbugs and immunization hesitancy, and this doctor has her work cut out for her, albeit with her priorities well in place.

“Too often, your ZIP code can be the most accurate determinant of your health.”

DeSalvo often harkens back to the post-Katrina madness, and the absolute importance of coalescing.

“We were all in it together, and the rules and the hierarchy went out the window, for the good of the patients. There’s an old African proverb: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

WOMEN POWER

There was a time when there would have been no need for an organization called the Women Presidents’ Organization (WPO). Today, the number of women-owned and women-led companies is staggering.

For Marsha Firestone (NC ’65), president and founder of WPO, the idea was hatched out of sheer frustration with the status quo.

“After Newcomb, I had applied to law school at Tulane, but the dean told me I wasn’t cut out for law school, as I had a boyfriend and was about to become engaged. Surely, I didn’t have time for both.”

She moved to New York City and enrolled in Columbia University's graduate school. Eventually, Firestone earned a PhD in communications and followed her dream of starting a company, composed of women presidents who owned and led \$1 million-plus businesses. They would come together for entrepreneurial education on a worldwide basis. The first chapter opened in 1997.

"Every year, we've published a book about the 50 fastest-growing women-led companies. It's important because I wanted other women to see that these were substantial businesses across all platforms; that they were large, quickly growing; and certainly businesses that could, would and presently were competing with male-owned businesses."

With a maximum of 20 presidents in each chapter, WPO provides a peer advisory group where expertise is shared in a noncompetitive, collaborative environment. There are now over 130 chapters, on six continents. The total aggregate of the businesses represents \$21.8 billion in annual revenues.

"I've built a huge network of connections, which is ultimately very important in both your business and personal life."

Firestone is married and has one son, an attorney, whose wife has an MBA and runs a charter school. Firestone said that her 7-year-old granddaughter is definitely WPO material. As for her 3-year-old grandson?

"Too early to predict his destiny, but we know one thing ... he will treat women well."

BRIDGE MAESTRO

Jill Meyers (NC '71) is a World Grand Master bridge player, possesses a law degree, and is the successful owner of a music business that engages in music consulting for TV shows like "The Voice," "Lip Sync Battle" and "House of Cards," to name just a few of the Hollywood productions with which her Santa Monica, California-based company, is actively engaged.

Meyers presents a puzzling dichotomy as a competitive bridge player and a business dealmaker. But to hear her tell it, there are many overlaps in the brain functions involved in being facile in both arenas.

“My music business is totally about solving problems. Music supervisors clear music (licensing the music for use in any given production), and I’m a lawyer, so I negotiate deals. Playing bridge at the tournament level requires a great deal of logic and problem-solving abilities, in being able to read one’s opponents and strategize accordingly.”

Meyers learned to play bridge when she was 10 years old, but tournament bridge is dominated by men. “As a graduate of a women’s college, I was insulated from gender bias and was shocked when I found out it existed, particularly in the world of bridge.

“Whether culturally or biologically, many men I compete against don’t like sharing the limelight with or losing to a woman. Many men don’t perceive women to be good bridge partners, therefore don’t use them; the women then get less experience, and it has the ripple effect.”

The latest studies show that without early exposure to games like bridge and chess, one just cannot be as competitive at the higher echelons. It’s why Bill Gates (who will be playing in an upcoming Halloween tournament) and Warren Buffett have partnered to promote bridge in elementary schools.

“Bridge attracts very smart people,” said Meyers, “but not necessarily social people, which is why I also love the music world, filled with hip, with-it, social people. But, I love my smart, nerdy friends, who after all, are running the world.”

FEMINISM TODAY

If you’re [Terry O’Neill \(L ’80\)](#), president of the National Organization for Women since 2009, you’ve long been fighting for equal rights for women.

“Today, far more millennials identify as feminists than baby boomer women,” said O’Neill, “and 85 percent of men now believe women should have equality.”

Becoming a political activist in the early 1990s, when former Klansman David Duke was running for governor of Louisiana, O’Neill went door-to-door disseminating anti-Duke literature.

“Whether one is a fan of Hillary Clinton, or not,” said O’Neill, “should she become president, the symbolism behind having a woman as the leader of the free world is profound.”

Women have made it into combat, and are now CEOs in the boardroom, but economic disparity is still an issue.

“As the glass ceiling gets broken,” said O’Neill, “(and people around here call it a sticky floor), 70 percent of wage workers are women. We need to start paying social workers and teachers—and other kinds of jobs that are predominantly done by females—the same salaries that we pay to those who repair bridges and pave roads ... predominantly male-dominated occupations. There is still a huge, gender wage gap, overall.”

Considering the changes that have occurred, should the current generation of women appreciate the pioneers who preceded them?

“Why would millennials be grateful for the work their predecessors have done? It’s a long time ago. What we do want from them is to be proactive. And, I think that’s happening. Just Google actress Emma Watson’s game-changing, impassioned speech before the United Nations, galvanizing young men to become advocates for ending the inequalities that women face globally,” said O’Neill. “I think she exemplified that this generation of women is still about advocacy. You cannot listen to that speech and *not* be impressed with where feminism is today.”

[This article](#) originally appeared in the September 2016 issue of [Tulane magazine](#).