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CREW San Diego Celebrates 25th Anniversary With a Look at the Past and Future

Members discuss progress made and new goals as Inland Empire builds new chapter



BY MANDY JACKSON
CREJ Staff Writer

As the San Diego chapter of Commercial Real Estate Women celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, its members are looking back at the progress they've made and to a future where they hope the sky is the limit.

Women who remember being the only female professional in business meetings now look across the table and see women lawyers, brokers, developers, lenders, architects and construction managers. CREW chapters in San Diego and elsewhere hope to increase their membership as a result and offer support as women prepare for leadership roles.

Deborah Davidson, sales and marketing manager for **Barrister Executive Suites**, is president of CREW San Diego and has been on the organization's board of directors for four years. Davidson has been involved in commercial real estate for 23 years, the last 20 of which were in San Diego.

"Twenty years ago when I went into a meeting, there was a male title representative, a male lender, a male broker, and I was the only woman in the room," Davidson said.

She worked in property management for a bank and had to hire brokers, but she remembers only one female broker in the business at that time.

"I felt that I wasn't taken seriously when I walked into a room and it was all men," Davidson said. "Here I was working for a bank as an assistant vice president, and I was going in to negotiate a lease."

She said she doesn't get that feeling of not being taken seriously anymore as more men have gotten used to the idea of women in key roles in the industry.

"Also, very rarely do I walk into a room where I'm the only woman," Davidson said. "My company president is a woman. Our broker is a woman."

Ten years ago Misty Moore, now vice president in corporate services at **The Staubach Co.**, got into the commercial real estate business as a tenant representative. Even then, Moore said she felt the same way in business meetings that her female predecessors did — that everyone thought she was the male broker's secretary, not his partner.

Since then, she has seen an increasing number of female attorneys, brokers and other women in leadership roles at commercial real estate firms. Moore got involved in CREW because it gave her opportunities early in her career for leadership roles as a member of the San Diego chapter's board. Now she's a national delegate.

Tara Yamauchi, who works in business development for landscape contractor **Brickman** in San Diego, got involved with CREW in 2004 after she graduated from college and turned her internship at Brickman into a full-time job.

"As a service provider, all of our competitors now have account managers who are women," Yamauchi said. "Just since 2004 I've noticed a lot more women. I'm starting to see a lot more women decision-makers."

Yamauchi, now a member of the CREW board of directors, took advantage of the organization's networking opportunities and mentoring program, which helped her gain the confidence that has helped her in her work.

"I think there are a lot less barriers to cross now," she said.

While Yamauchi was the first female intern

at Brickman on the West Coast and remains the only woman in the company's San Diego office, she said it doesn't occur to her or her male co-workers that she's any different.

"I don't see it," Yamauchi said. "I'm treated as one of the team."

Starting Off in San Diego

Barbara Krumvieda, the founding president of the CREW San Diego chapter, is happy that both young women and those who've been in commercial real estate for a few decades are noticing more female counterparts in the industry.

"Now, the older women say these younger women don't know how far we've come," Krumvieda said. "I say that's great, that we're a success if [younger women] don't even have to think about it."

Krumvieda is no longer involved in commercial real estate on a day-to-day basis. She and her husband, who lost their only child to leukemia several years ago, are now on the national board of directors for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

She started her career in property management in Los Angeles and later moved at the request of her employer to San Diego, but she took six months off when her daughter died in 1983. Krumvieda returned to work at the urging of her peers, but at that time she got into brokerage at **Grubb & Ellis** in San Diego. That was when she decided that women in the industry needed their own business organization.

CREW San Diego is one of the 11 founding chapters of CREW Network, the national organization for women in commercial real estate, which has nearly 8,000 members in 66 North American chapters.

The goal in establishing the San Diego chapter was to provide a support group to encourage and help women in the industry so that they could be successful in the long term and recruit more women into commercial real estate careers.

Davidson said she likes CREW because of the opportunities for women to help other women and because of the networking advantages.

"I've called CREW members throughout the country," Davidson said. "A CREW member will take a call from any CREW member anytime."

The San Diego chapter participates in the national organization's CREW Careers program, which pairs women in the industry with young women, usually from high schools or programs for at-risk girls, to expose them to commercial real estate and show them they can do anything from brokerage to finance.

CREW San Diego has supported the Big Sister League of San Diego since 1994. The nonprofit has a mission to build self esteem, confidence and independence for girls through its mentoring program and a transitional housing program for mentally ill, homeless or abused women.

Continued Relevance

Linda Greenberg, senior vice president and an industrial broker at **Colliers International**, served as president of CREW San Diego for one year in the 1980s and again in 1995. Greenberg was the national president in 1991 and 1992 and remains a CREW member.

She said the organization has evolved over the years. Initially, the focus was on bringing

women into the industry and ensuring their success. Now, while the mentoring component remains, the focus is more on networking and giving back to the community.

"I think mentoring is extremely important because I think a lot of people — both men and women — don't consider the commercial real estate industry when they're contemplating career choices," Greenberg said.

She noted that there are not as many people getting into brokerage in particular and that there is likely to be people leaving the business in the next year or so because of the slowdown in the commercial real estate market.

That's why it is important, Greenberg said, for brokerage firms to participate in career days at local universities and at high schools, especially in the inner city, to introduce students to the possibility of a commercial real estate career.

Debra Aitken, assistant vice president in asset management at **California Bank & Trust** and CREW San Diego president-elect, moved with her husband from Toronto, Ontario, Canada to San Diego in 1996.

"We knew nobody here, so I relied on the business I knew, which was contract furniture sales," Aitken said. "After a few more years in the furniture industry, I decided I needed to reinvent myself."

Aitken discovered CREW in 1999. By 2003, she was president of CREW San Diego, a position she'll hold again next year.

After losing members, the local chapter had to rebuild in the early 2000s. This year, the goal is to surpass 100 members with a 20 percent to 30 percent boost in membership.

Aitken said companies in San Diego should embrace CREW and pay their employees' membership fees. Davidson agreed, noting that several brokerages don't encourage their female brokers to get involved in the organization.

As the organization moves forward, CREW San Diego is focused on getting more companies to support their employees' involvement in the organization in addition to continuing to provide networking opportunities, keeping programs strong, increasing sponsorship dollars and attracting and retaining members.

Increasing membership is at the top of the list for Ruby Simpson of **Sperry Van Ness**. She is president of the Inland Empire's new CREW chapter.

"You have to have 10 members to start and now we have 43 or 44 officially approved members and we have five more pending," Simpson said. "We will surely be over 50, which is my goal, by the end of year."

At the nucleus of the CREW Inland Empire chapter is women who used to get together for dinner and movies on a fairly regular basis, just because there was nothing else available for women in commercial real estate in the Inland Empire.

Now, Simpson hopes that CREW members in the Inland Empire will benefit from the organization's mission of women in commercial real estate helping other women in the business, no matter where they are located.

"If I need an architect in Minneapolis, I can call CREW Minneapolis and get a referral and know two things," Simpson said. "Because she's a CREW member, she's been vetted, and because I'm a CREW member, she's going to take my call."

She called it an amazing "old girls network."

— E-mail Mandy_Jackson@DailyJournal.com