

PBN PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

BUSINESS *Women* 2021 AWARDS



CAREER ACHIEVER
BRENDA SEAGRAVE-WHITTLE
Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island
Her path led to where she 'truly belonged'
pg 4

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Brenda Seagrave-Whittle

**Chief Marketing Officer
Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island**

Congratulations to Brenda on being selected the “Career Achiever” of PBN’s 2021 Business Women Awards. On behalf of your Neighborhood colleagues and many community partners, thank you for your leadership, advocacy and passion to ensure all Rhode Islanders have equal access to high-quality health care. We congratulate you and all of the awards honorees for your outstanding work.

PARTNER SPONSOR MESSAGE

Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island is proud to be the Partner Sponsor of the 14th Annual PBN Business Women Awards Program. We are honored to help shine the spotlight on some of Rhode Island's most remarkable women, including our Chief Marketing Officer Brenda Seagrave-Whittle – "Career Achiever" of this year's awards program. Congratulations to all of the 2021 Business Women Award honorees! Your talents and passion for the work you do make Rhode Island a better place to work and live. Thank you for serving as strong role models for the next generation of women leaders.



FROM THE EDITOR

To these leaders, helping others comes naturally



EMPLOYERS and hiring managers are constantly in search of those people whose backgrounds, personalities and experiences make them naturals for available jobs. That's because they often become the engines that drive their

departments and companies to success in good economic times and bad. It's almost as though they, like Brenda Seagrave-Whittle, were born for the challenges.

The chief marketing officer for Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island and 2021 Career Achiever knew from an early age "that my purpose in life was to stand up for others and to give them a voice."

The R.I. Department of Labor and Training, Thundermist Health Care Associates and St. Joseph Hospital were all beneficiaries of her passion for serving others. She joined Neighborhood in 2001 and has continued that lifelong pursuit.

The nonprofit has approximately 500 employees and 195,000 members, about 80% of which are Medicaid eligible. Not surprisingly, Seagrave-Whittle has been at the fore-

front of efforts to ensure staff and members have access to the services they need during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's a job for which she's been preparing her whole life.

Such selfless support for others is, in fact, a common thread in the stories you'll find in this special section on this year's honorees.

Take Tracy McCaughey, for example. Her job title, managing director of compliance and ethics and the corporate compliance officer for Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, suggests enough responsibility for two people. Yet it doesn't even mention the reason the 2021 Outstanding Mentor is being recognized this year.

Helping others reach their potential, it seems, just comes naturally to her, something Blue Cross and her colleagues routinely benefit from.

We thank the partner sponsor for the 2021 Business Women Awards program, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island.

Michael Mello

Michael Mello
Editor

Providence Business News

Congratulations Mary Leach

on being named the
**2021 Providence Business News
Business Women Industry Leader
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Mary Leach
*Executive Vice President
Director of Consumer Relationships*

We're all in.

Seagrave-Whittle's path led to where she 'truly belonged'

BY JOHN A. LAHTINEN | Contributing Writer

WITH PARENTS WHO WERE VERY ACTIVE in the Somers, Conn., community and with schools she and her siblings attended, Brenda Seagrave-Whittle was provided with a very stable foundation based on the importance of giving back and caring for others.

"I realized early on in my life that I was born to protect, support and advocate for people, so the advocacy part of my career was always in my DNA," said Seagrave-Whittle, chief marketing officer at **Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island**. "We were always a close-knit family and I realized at a very young age how fortunate I was, not just to feel loved and cared for but also to never be lacking for anything significant. Growing up, I always had this deep sense of awareness that life was not fair to everyone and that people who were struggling needed an advocate by their side. I had a fire within my belly for standing up for what was right. I just knew that my purpose in life was to stand up for others and to give them a voice."

In her adolescent years, Seagrave-Whittle became passionate about advocacy work and was acutely aware of the Vietnam War and the women's and civil rights movements. In college, in addition to earning her psychology degree and marrying her husband, Shelly, she helped a family member get out of an abusive relationship and began volunteering at a domestic violence shelter and a rape crisis center.

Following a couple of job transfers for Shelly to New York and Connecticut, the couple ended up in Rhode Island in 1990. That's when Seagrave-Whittle began working in the unemployment division at the R.I. Department of Labor and Training, providing support to the unemployed. About a year later, when a position providing direct services to the underserved opened up at one of the state's community health centers, Thundermist Health Care Associates – now Thundermist Health Center, she jumped at the opportunity.

"I found my way to where I truly belonged – in a health care setting advocating for the disadvantaged," Seagrave-Whittle said. "I had always admired the work of Rhode Island's community health centers because of their focus on health equity and their commitment to providing access to health care to anyone, including undocumented families."

Her nearly 10-year tenure at Thundermist launched what has become a lifetime career focusing on advocacy for vulnerable populations and ensuring everyone in Rhode Island has access to high-quality, affordable health care.



EARLY CALLING: Brenda Seagrave-Whittle, chief marketing officer at Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, says she knew from an early age that she was "born to protect, support and advocate for people" and that her purpose in life was to "stand up for others and give them a voice."

COURTESY HUGHES FIORETTI PHOTOGRAPHY

Before joining Providence-based Neighborhood in 2001, Seagrave-Whittle spent two years at St. Joseph Hospital working on a national grant critical to expanding health care access for eligible but uninsured vulnerable populations.

Not surprisingly, Seagrave-Whittle has been heavily focused on leading Neighborhood's response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year. Initial efforts, she said, focused on educating members and high-risk communities about COVID-19, the safety measures they should be taking, and how and where to get tested. Neighborhood also took measures to educate the public about the importance of having health insurance and emphasized to the recently unemployed or underemployed that they were eligible for free or low-cost health coverage. In addition to supporting the state's front-line health care workers with meals and protective supplies, more-recent efforts have focused on ensuring the most vulnerable Rhode Islanders have access to COVID-19 vaccines.

While still in the early stages, Seagrave-

Whittle is very excited about Neighborhood's developing community Health Van Program, which aims to remove one of the key barriers underserved Rhode Islanders face when they need access to health care – transportation. Neighborhood has also partnered with Luna-You, a Providence-based maternal well-being program designed for all pregnant women but heavily focused on empowering disadvantaged women of color.

Peter Marino, Neighborhood's CEO and president, said Seagrave-Whittle believes her fundamental role is to serve others and that she exhibits that belief every day.

"The remarkable thing about Brenda is that she goes above and beyond for people, especially those who are underserved, every single day. It's just her nature," Marino said. "Brenda brings to the table passion, empathy, business and marketing acumen, and the ability to coalesce teams around an issue. She demonstrates character, courage and integrity as a strong advocate for those who are most in need of a voice. Brenda serves with genuine kindness and an authenticity that is unmatched. Her face lights up when she knows her work has improved someone's life."

Seagrave-Whittle credits her husband and her two children, Sarah and Sean, for supporting her and her career choices over the years.

"Little did I know at the time that I was inspiring them through the work I did," she said. "My daughter wound up becoming a doctor and my son wound up becoming a teacher – both in service to others." ■

'Brenda brings to the table passion, empathy, **business and marketing acumen.**'

PETER MARINO, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island CEO and president

**A STRONG WOMAN
STANDS UP FOR HERSELF.**

**A STRONGER WOMAN
STANDS UP FOR EVERYONE ELSE.**



AMY GRZYBOWSKI

We are proud of your achievements in government service
to improve the lives of the citizens of Rhode Island.

You are an inspiration to all who work with you,
and you truly are a leader to admire.



Congratulations Amy Grzybowski,

a Providence Business News 2021 Woman to Watch honoree

And to all the Business Women Award recipients



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TWO-WAY STREET: As managing director of compliance and ethics and corporate compliance officer at Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, mentoring is not part of Tracy McCaughey's job description, but she feels a duty to give back and help others along the way, often learning from those experiences. PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

McCaughey feels a duty to support, guide others

BY MARY HOWE | Contributing Writer

MANY INSTITUTIONS run valuable mentoring programs. But, effective mentoring – formal or informal – must always begin with a relationship founded on caring and trust, according to Tracy McCaughey, managing director of compliance and ethics and corporate compliance officer for **Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island**.

"There is no better feeling than knowing you have made a positive impact on someone's life," McCaughey said. "It is rewarding to help a person by bringing them to an understanding of what their potential could be."

McCaughey has been with the Providence-based health insurer for 16 years of her 36-year career.

Being a mentor is not part of McCaughey's formal job description, but she believes people who are successful in their own lives and careers should feel a duty to be a supporter and guide for others. She called mentoring "a two-way street," adding, "I've learned a great deal from people I have mentored."

An example is McCaughey's relationship with Aneesah Cameron, a contract development specialist at Blue Cross whom McCaughey supervised and encouraged through moments of self-doubt. Some time ago, Cameron learned that the building she lived in was to be sold, and she told McCaughey that she was worried about finding a new apartment for herself and her mother and brother.

McCaughey suggested to Cameron that she consider buying a house, which stunned the younger colleague, a Black woman from a family that had never owned property. After a long process with lots of ups and downs, Cameron succeeded in buying a house. McCaughey, meanwhile, got an insider's view of institutional hurdles

faced by minorities, including banks that would not lend to Black people.

Michele Lederberg, executive vice president at Blue Cross, said of McCaughey, "She sees potential in people, and she goes out of her way to help them see the potential in themselves."

Some years ago, McCaughey heard a presentation by the Rhode Island Foundation about how to step into the world of serving on boards of directors. With some hesitation, McCaughey began serving on a committee of the Women's Resources Center, a nonprofit that helps people who are experiencing domestic violence.

Eventually she became a board member. She was in that role when Jessica Walsh, now the executive director, was serving as interim

executive director while the organization was searching for a new permanent director.

Walsh had told the board she did not want the permanent position, but her view began to change after a quiet conversation with McCaughey, who prodded her about her reluctance. Walsh said she might be interested in the job if it was altered in some ways from its previous incarnation. McCaughey urged Walsh to be frank with the board about her ideas for the position.

"I encouraged her to consider the role and consider how she would like to change that role," McCaughey said. Ultimately, Walsh took on the job permanently, a boon to Walsh and to the organization, McCaughey said.

McCaughey said racial justice is an important issue for her. She serves as executive sponsor – an advocate and intermediary to the executive level – of Black Council@Blue, one of Blue Cross' employee business resource groups. She was selected as executive sponsor, said a company document, "in recognition of her advocacy and willingness to learn and change in order to be an effective white ally both inside and outside of the company."

Lederberg concurred, saying that McCaughey "feels that as a white person of privilege, she has had more opportunities than others may have had, so she feels obligated to provide guidance to others."

McCaughey said she was surprised and pleased when Shikenyah Gough, an information technology product manager and member of Black Council@Blue, told McCaughey that she had told the group, "Tracy is the person who looked at the skills and potential of all of us and tried to create opportunities for us to succeed." ■

'She sees potential in people, and she goes out of her way to help them see the potential in themselves.'

MICHELE LEDERBERG, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island executive vice president

PBN'S UPCOMING RECOGNITION EVENTS

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AUGUST 26

25 Leaders and Achievers will be recognized for their notable success and strong leadership both in their fields and to the region.

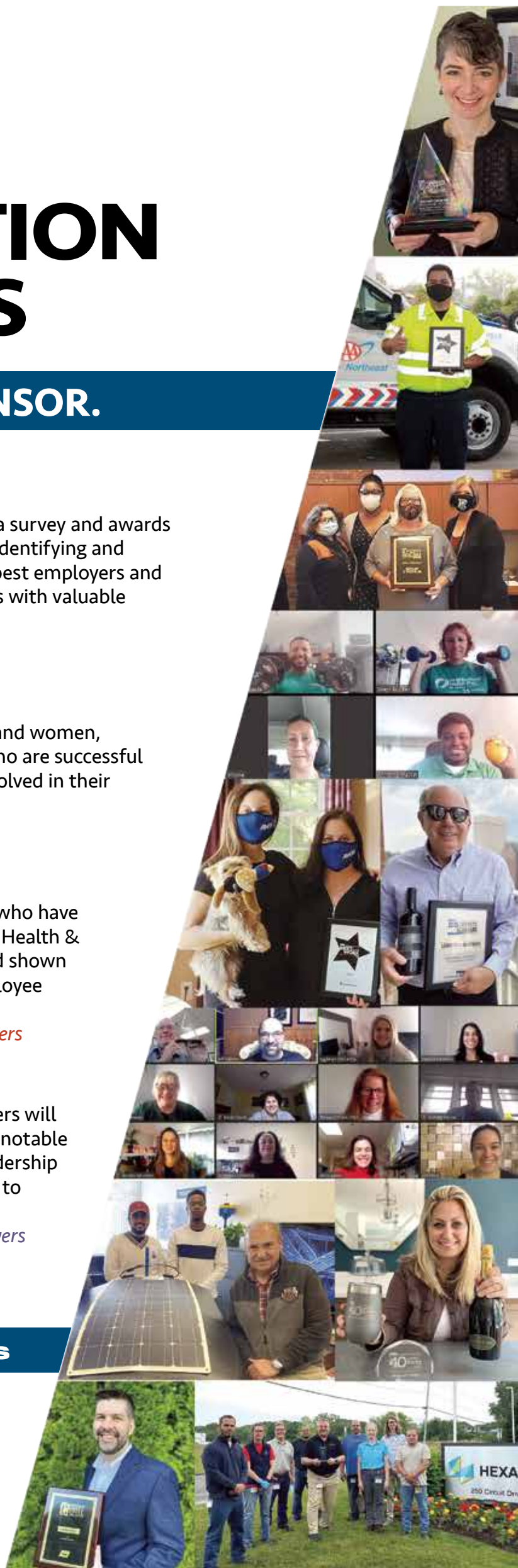
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LEVELING UP: JoEllen Fiorenzano, CEO and president of F.A.F. Inc. in Smithfield, has spent more than four decades at the fashion jewelry designer and supplier, working her way up from what started as a high school job to now leading the company for the past three years. COURTESY F.A.F. INC.



Fiorenzano gives back in many different ways

BY PAUL E. KANDARIAN | Contributing Writer

JOELLEN FIORENZANO, CEO and president of **F.A.F. Inc.** in Smithfield, wasn't exactly born into the job but it was close.

"I worked here in high school, through my years at Providence College, and came here right after graduation," Fiorenzano said. "So, I've been here awhile."

For 41 years, to be precise, working her way up the ladder at F.A.F., which does business as Fashion Accessories First. She became the company's leader three years ago.

"I've held a lot of positions here and am familiar with all of them," she said. "I had to learn them all from those early days when we were still doing manufacturing in the early '80s, including traveling to China to work on products. I really got to learn a lot about every aspect of this business, and that's helped me tremendously."

F.A.F. has multiple brands in its fold, including Catherine Stein Designs, Hive Hair New York, Wit Accessories and Lark & Laurel. The company bills itself as an award-winning leader in designing, merchandising and supplying fashion jewelry and accessories to giant retailers such as Walmart Inc., which is F.A.F.'s biggest client and chose F.A.F. as its Supplier of the Year for Execution award in 2016.

"We have some pretty big clients [such as] Walmart, and we do hair accessories for CVS [Health Corp.]," Fiorenzano said, adding that after F.A.F. bought the division of Catherine Stein, it's "focused down now more, doing business with Family Dollar and the big guys."

Fiorenzano says working with large retailers is complex.

"They're sometimes not easy to

work with," she said. "You need suppliers who know how to work with them and deliver to their stores."

Business executives at Fiorenzano's level tend to move around, but of her four-plus decades at F.A.F., she said, "It's unusual but it isn't. There's quite a few who've been here close to as long as I have. You get in, you grow, you take on more responsibility. You have to do what you love, and for the people I work with, the culture is important. It's important to me. I want a nice place to work with people who love and are passionate about what they do."

"She is one of the warmest people I know, always willing to roll up her sleeves, highly involved in projects her teams take on," said Betty Robson, president of JF Moran Co. in Smithfield. "She believes strongly in bringing other women into projects, empowering them

'She believes strongly in bringing other women into projects, empowering them to learn and perform to the highest of their capabilities.'

BETTY ROBSON, JF Moran Co. president

to learn and perform to the highest of their capabilities."

Robson said Fiorenzano was an early adopter of internships, working with colleges and high schools to identify the skills of students and grow them.

"We're close friends, and I love having another woman leader to talk through issues and ideas," Robson said. "She's always willing to share what's worked well for her so we can all find solutions. She truly wants others to succeed."

Philanthropy is important to Fiorenzano. She helped create the FAF Cares Fund in partnership with the Rhode Island Foundation.

"I thought it could be something our people could do throughout their lives, not just giving money but their time by volunteering for places like Amos House," she said. "And whatever company event we hold, there's always an aspect of giving back, such as a food drive attached to a nonprofit organization."

Her employees' charitable involvement, Fiorenzano said, "seems to drive up their motivation levels at work, strengthens their sense of camaraderie and kinship with each other, and gives them emotional fulfillment from helping others in the community."

As a female CEO, Fiorenzano knows she's a role model for younger women and embraces the opportunity to help others who are where she once was.

"I love sharing and mentoring young women in our business," she said. "I think when you come from a background like mine, you can say to someone who's struggling, 'I've done that.' It gives you a little more credibility." ■

Helping clients own the moment

BY PAUL E. KANDARIAN | Contributing Writer

KATIE SCHIBLER CONN knows about milking yaks and kicking butt. Seriously.

Conn once abandoned a high-paying job with the PlayStation brand at Sony Interactive Entertainment to spend three months living on a yak farm in Mongolia. She loved the beasts but found it difficult to milk them. However, the time allowed her to take stock of her life away from the hustle and bustle of the business world.

Conn decided to move back to Rhode Island, where her parents lived. Within 48 hours of her return to civilization, she got a call from an old client at PepsiCo Inc. who asked if she needed work, which led to her founding **Katie Schibler & Associates LLC**, doing business as KSA Marketing, in Warwick.

“I love marketing and working with clients more so than being on the corporate side,” Conn said of making the leap to opening her own business.

The business grew, then COVID-19 hit. But since her business

was in many ways a remote one already, with some employees working out of the Philippines and Vietnam, it was a seamless transition. She added administration positions to keep the growth alive.

Asked if she works with clients as she once had, she laughed and said, “Nah, I’m just known for my crazy ideas and stories. I have staff for that stuff. I do the vision thing, business development and overseeing the leadership team.”

Conn said KSA’s best clients are those in their “oh, [no] moments when something’s not working. So, we work with them



LEADING WOMAN: Katie Schibler Conn, founder of KSA Marketing, says it's important to empower women and teach them how to earn respect and be assertive so they can set good examples of how to lead.
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

to own their own [stuff]. Then you can kick some [butt]. That’s how I manage my team to lead our clients. We tend to attract disruptors, the hungry, those looking to do things differently.”

As owner of a certified Women Business Enterprise and a wom-

an-owned small business, Conn said, “I believe so strongly we need fellow women to set good examples on how to lead ... it’s important to teach them and empower them how to earn respect and be assertive – and kick some [butt].” ■

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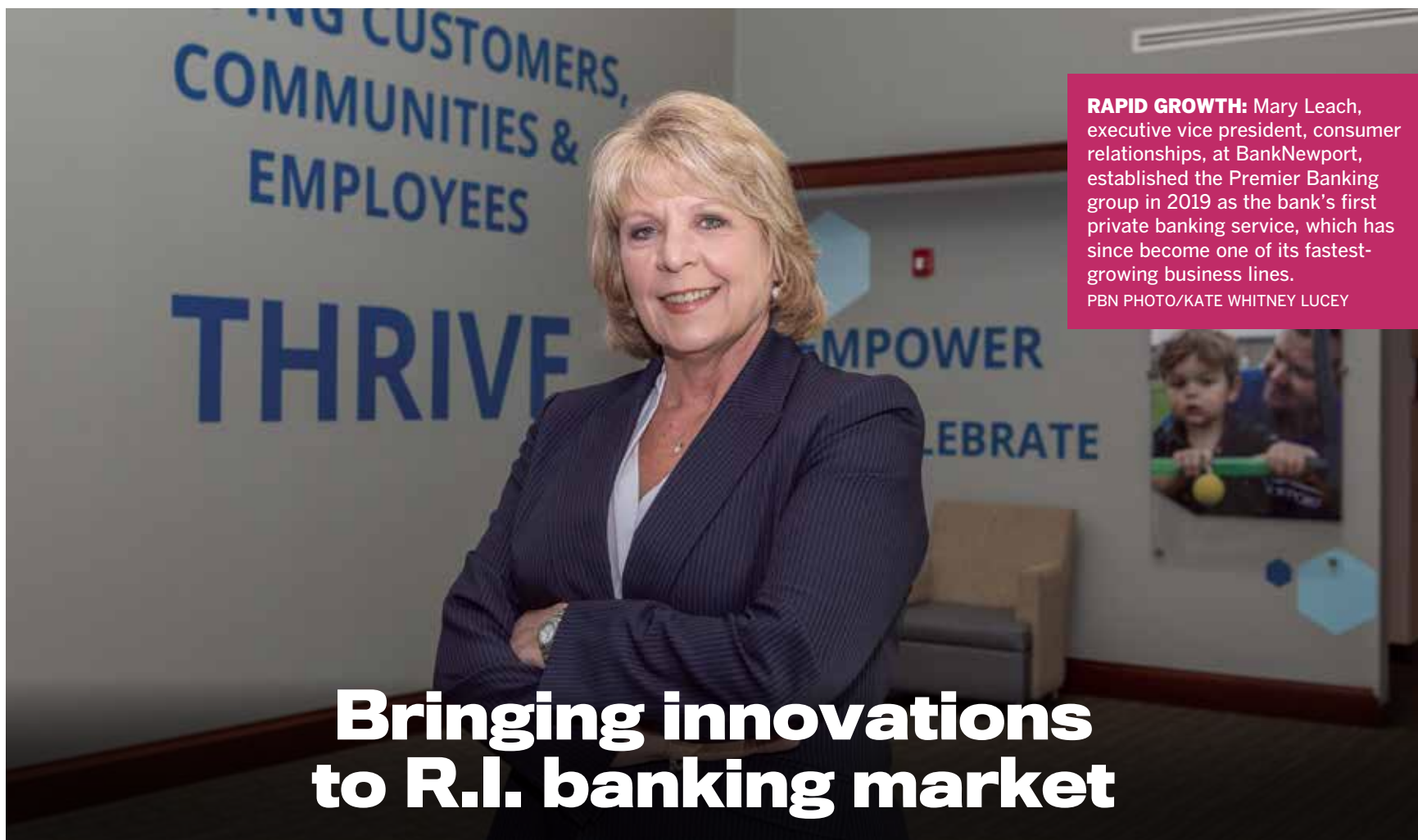
Jessica J. McCarthy

VP of Marketing, PR and Communications
Care New England Health System

on receiving PBN's 2021 Business Women Award for
Health Care Services Woman to Watch

This annual program recognizes leading women in various business, government, and nonprofit sectors and their work for their respective organizations.





RAPID GROWTH: Mary Leach, executive vice president, consumer relationships, at BankNewport, established the Premier Banking group in 2019 as the bank's first private banking service, which has since become one of its fastest-growing business lines.
PBN PHOTO/KATE WHITNEY LUCEY

Bringing innovations to R.I. banking market

BY NANCY KIRSCH | Contributing Writer

MARY LEACH HAS a massive portfolio of responsibilities in her role as executive vice president, consumer relationships, for **BankNewport**, with \$1.6 billion in deposits. She oversees the operations and sales at the Middletown-based bank's 17 branches statewide, as well as its 90 bankers and a 12-person call center.

With more than 35 years of banking experience, Leach continues to introduce innovations to the Rhode Island banking market, many of which marry technology with human interactions.

One such change is the interactive personal teller machines, which replaced traditional drive-up bank windows and blend the convenience of ATM services and face-to-face service from a personal banker via a secure video communication.

"The biggest challenge" to using the PTMs, which are now at eight locations, "was getting customers to embrace new technology and understand all the new features," Leach said. "Strange as it was, the pandemic brought customers to use the PTMs. Very early in COVID, people used the PTMs at three times the rate they did before COVID."

In 2016, Leach also brought to BankNewport the "universal banker" model, in which each banker is trained to provide the full array of banking services customers seek, such as depositing or withdrawing money, getting new loans and opening accounts, rather than requiring customers to engage with multiple bankers.

"Mary had the foresight to serve customers better with one-stop shopping and to allow bankers opportunities to learn more," said Wendy Kagan, BankNewport executive vice president and director of employee and community engagement. Describing it as a tough decision, as some tellers didn't want to sell and employ-

ees selling accounts didn't want to do transactional work, Kagan added, "We created a task force ... she knows that we really needed to understand the stakeholders and audience, get buy-in and recognize all the components we needed to execute."

"Implementing the universal banker approach was a pretty significant change that we did in a phased-in approach," Leach said. "We don't really have a traditional teller role now."

Since 2017, BankNewport has opened four retail branches under Leach's direction. With a blueprint of expansion desires, including Warwick and areas north of Johnston, she said the bank is "always actively looking."

Among the bank's fastest-growing business lines is the Premier Banking group, which offers concierge services and provides personalized products and services. Some 500 new high net worth customers, or those who have

at least \$500,000 in deposits, are now in the Premier Banking group. Leach established the group in 2019 as the bank's first private banking service.

"I ... spearheaded [these initiatives], but each required a group of people to bring them to fruition. It makes me excited to know BankNewport has highly skilled and capable people who are willing to jump in and support [new projects]," Leach said. "Technology in banking is changing nearly by the minute. To remain competitive, we have to be open-minded, consider what customers want and [propose] solutions. I like to take a little bit of risk; I'm always looking for something new and different."

Having worked closely with Leach for several years at BankNewport, and earlier at Citizens Bank N.A., Kagan said, "Leach doesn't promote herself in the community, as she's more focused on getting things done to make the bank successful."

Although BankNewport didn't close its branches during the COVID-19 pandemic, customers for several months last year were required to make appointments to enter the bank lobbies.

"We never reduced pay, regardless of reduced hours; we made that decision together," Kagan said, "as our employees' well-being was so important." Once BankNewport got past all the personal protective equipment requirements and allayed anxieties, "we grew deposits to record levels ... we did extremely well across all business lines," Leach said.

Leach, a Rhode Island native, is grateful for the opportunities she's had to grow, progress and contribute professionally right at home.

"It's been icing on the cake to do that here in Rhode Island," she said. ■

'Mary had the **foresight** to serve customers better with one-stop shopping and to allow bankers opportunities to learn more.'

WENDY KAGAN, BankNewport executive vice president and director of employee and community engagement

Focused on lifting her colleagues

BY JENNA PELLETIER | Contributing Writer

JESS HUTCHINSON KEEPS a sticky note on her desk with the phrase “lift as you climb” written on it. Hutchinson has followed that mantra over the last 15 years as she has risen through the ranks of human resources at **Bank of America Corp.** to her role of vice president, talent mobility adviser.

“I’m a people person, and I love the personal aspects of helping people meet their career goals,” Hutchinson said.

In her position, Hutchinson focuses on retaining talent by providing guidance on career skills and advancement opportunities within Bank of America for current employees. Overseeing a territory from Maine to Florida, she serves as an “internal applicant’s advocate,” or a liaison between candidates and hiring managers within consumer banking, home loans, global technology and other areas of the multinational banking and financial services company.

In her previous position as a corporate recruiter, she was responsible for hiring for the Merrill

Lynch Financial Advisor Development Program across several Northeast markets. One figure she’s especially proud of: In 2020, 92% of her hiring was diverse.

“Hiring diverse talent makes us stronger,” Hutchinson said. “We are able to truly mirror the clients we serve, and in the grand scheme of things, that’s what helps advance racial equality and economic opportunity.”

While Hutchinson’s position, based in Bank of America’s Lincoln office, spans markets throughout the East Coast, she seeks out opportunities to be involved with Bank of America’s Rhode Island initiatives. For several years, she has served as chairwoman for the Bank of America Community Vol-



TALENT SCOUT: Jess Hutchinson, a Bank of America Corp. vice president, provides career guidance to employees from Maine to Florida so the bank can retain its exceptional personnel.

COURTESY BANK OF AMERICA CORP.

unteers program, which supports various nonprofit organizations in the state, including Habitat for Humanity South County, Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island and Save The Bay Inc.

She also recently planned and executed a monthlong career development workshop series for Bank of America’s Rhode Island employees. The eight-hour seminars focused on the power of the employ-

ee’s role in their own personal and professional development. Based on its success, her “Invest in Your Development” model will now be replicated in other markets.

“I really want to connect the dots for employees to see that no matter where you are in your career, you can be that Bank of America life-timer and continually grow and develop,” Hutchinson said. ■

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Creative Services Woman to Watch

KATIE SCHIBLER CONN
KSA Marketing, founder



Technical Services Woman to Watch

ANDREA BARANYK
Northeast Collaborative Architects LLC, principal



The 2021 Achievement Honoree

SUSAN MOCARSKI
Cleverhood LLC, owner and principal designer



The 2021 Achievement Honoree

YEMI SEKONI
Donahue Models & Talent LLC, owner and director



Social Services/Nonprofit Industry Leader

KARINA HOLYOAK WOOD
Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses RI, executive director

MATCHMAKER: As assistant director of SupplyRI at the R.I. Commerce Corp., Doris Blanchard connects Rhode Island suppliers with large institutions in the state that agree to purchase goods and services from those suppliers, allowing the suppliers to grow and scale up.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

Making crucial connections to fuel R.I.'s economy

BY NANCY KIRSCH | Contributing Writer

WITH DIVERSE SKILLS in banking, finance, economic development and networking, Doris Blanchard, assistant director of SupplyRI at the **R.I. Commerce Corp.**, connects nearly 2,000 Rhode Island suppliers with large “anchor” institutions in the state, which commit to purchasing goods and services from those suppliers.

Launched in 2018 by then-Gov. Gina M. Raimondo, SupplyRI is a public-private initiative funded by R.I. Commerce, the Rhode Island Foundation and the Heron Foundation. Amica Mutual Insurance Co., Citizens Bank N.A., Lifespan Corp., Care New England Health System, and Shawmut Design and Construction are among 15 current anchors.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, SupplyRI’s survey of anchors’ needs and suppliers’ goods and services proved valuable.

“We put together a list of suppliers under different categories – PPE [personal protective equipment], IT [information technology] services for Zoom, outdoor heat lamps, etc. The pandemic has shown us ... that Rhode Island businesses have the capacity to meet our needs,” Blanchard said. “By opening doors and connecting small businesses with larger buyers in the state, we have increased revenue and more jobs. We plan to expand our pool of diverse suppliers and increase our footprint across all sectors.”

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, more than \$108 million in contracts have been awarded, a significant increase from the \$3.5 million in contracts awarded before the crisis. SupplyRI offers workshops, surveys, and training and networking sessions to suppliers, some 20% of whom are minority-, women-, or veteran-owned business enterprises.

“Doris is a special human being ... she has the ability to connect with

thousands of suppliers and with anchors’ executives to communicate the value proposition of SupplyRI,” said R.I. Commerce Corp. President Jesse Saglio. “She has a vision for what SupplyRI can be.”

Blanchard also manages the Small Business Assistance Program, which leverages state funds with capital from private lenders to provide community-based funding to Rhode Island for-profit companies with 200 or fewer employees.

As of December 2020, \$4.3 million in state funds had leveraged \$20.8 million in loans to 158 small businesses since the program’s inception in 2016 under Raimondo. More than half of those loans went to minority-owned and women-owned businesses, said Blanchard, who noted that funds are still

available for interested businesses. Community Investment Corp., Rhode Island Capital Access and Social Enterprise Greenhouse are among the six community-based lenders that make microloans of \$2,000 to \$25,000 or small loans of more than \$25,000 to \$250,000.

“My passion is to provide resources, connections and programs so that small businesses can grow and scale up ... financial literacy is a big resource, especially for minority companies,” Blanchard said. “We work with many great partners in the state that provide valuable resources, but we need easier ways to navigate them.”

By collaborating with colleagues at other states’ economic development corporations, Blanchard identifies successful programs and adapts them to Rhode Island’s needs. For example, grant funds support analyzing the revenues of a cohort of SupplyRI participants to evaluate their progress.

Comfortable with being mentored and mentoring others, Blanchard meets weekly with Brontë Dinges, SupplyRI strategic sourcing program coordinator, to discuss Dinges’ job satisfaction, career goals and more.

“Whatever you learn to make you successful, you need to share those skills with others; that’s the beauty of leadership,” Blanchard said. “I love to empower women.”

Blanchard also serves as R.I. Commerce’s liaison to the R.I. Department of Transportation, R.I. Emergency Management Agency and R.I. Alliance for Business Reliance.

“Doris brings her analytical and financial acumen to her soft skills ... she is incredibly likeable. That well-rounded skill set is an important part of her success as she continues to advance,” Saglio said. “Doris, who is very much out in the community, inspires people to get involved.” ■

‘Whatever you learn to make you successful, **you need to share** those skills with others; that’s the beauty of leadership.’

DORIS BLANCHARD, R.I. Commerce Corp.
assistant director of SupplyRI

Navigating COVID, advancing careers

BY JENNA PELLETIER | Contributing Writer

THE LAST YEAR has been especially busy for Amy Grzybowski. She has worked tirelessly to help various individuals and organizations in Rhode Island navigate the safety guidelines and workforce effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In her primary role as the **R.I. Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner's** executive director of Rhode Island Higher Education & Industry Centers, Grzybowski has managed the Westerly Education Center as it has continued to offer college courses and workforce training programs within the guidelines necessitated by the pandemic.

Since the Westerly Education Center opened in 2017 as a public-private partnership, Grzybowski has overseen its programming and developed relationships with employers. In four years, she has raised \$1.7 million for new workforce training programs, including a program with General Dynamics Electric Boat in North Kingstown – more than 1,000 of the company's employees received the training

necessary to get hired through the program at the education center.

This year, the center became a Pearson VUE authorized testing site. "We're providing an opportunity so people can do what they need to advance their careers, whether [getting] a GED [diploma] or a professional certification," she said.

Over the last year, in addition to overseeing the Westerly Education Center and the addition of a smaller workforce development center in Woonsocket, Grzybowski also served as interim executive director of the Governor's Workforce Board and director of emergency management for the town of Westerly.

In Westerly, Grzybowski set up testing sites and vaccination clinics helped organizations un-



EXPANDED PROGRAMMING: As executive director of Rhode Island Higher Education & Industry Centers, Amy Grzybowski oversees the programming at the Westerly Education Center, where she has introduced new workforce training programs using the \$1.7 million she has raised in the past four years.

PBN PHOTO/TRACY JENKINS

derstand the latest guidelines and delivered meals to those who were unable to access them.

She also put her emergency management skills to use as the COVID-19 response liaison between state government and Rhode Island colleges and universities.

Grzybowski, who has three children and is studying for her doctorate in education, emphasizes that she couldn't do it all without

help.

"I have been fortunate to have incredible and dedicated employees that are committed to our mission of assisting Rhode Islanders on their path for higher education and employment," she said. "There is so much work to be done, and higher education and employers together can create opportunities to put Rhode Islanders back to work in a post-pandemic recovery." ■



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PATIENT-FOCUSED: Throughout her various leadership roles, Christine Gadbois, now the CEO of CareLink Inc., has worked to expand health care access to patients. At her initiative, CareLink recently developed a psychiatry consultation program for nursing home and group home residents.
PBN PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

Gadbois leads by example

BY NANCY KIRSCH | Contributing Writer

VOLUNTEERING AS A 13-YEAR-OLD candy striper set up Christine Gadbois for a lifelong nursing career. Gadbois, who earned her doctorate in nursing practice, among other degrees, held leadership roles with several health care entities before becoming CEO of **CareLink Inc.** in East Providence in 2019.

CareLink is a network of 11 nonprofit partners that collaborate to provide health care to elder adults, including specialized health care for residents in more than 55 nursing facilities statewide.

Gadbois, whose doctoral work focused on getting health care to stigmatized populations, expanded health care access to patients in earlier leadership roles.

“Access to good-quality, wraparound care in the least-restrictive environment benefits everyone,” she said. “Our CareLink members are among Rhode Island’s most well-respected health care providers for seniors ... we can leverage their expertise and resources to be a part of the solution.”

When COVID-19 kept nursing homes closed to outsiders, Gadbois mobilized her team to critically analyze the dental services CareLink has provided since 2008, primarily to nursing home residents who rely on Medicaid. The organization hired additional staff – three dentists and three dental hygienists – and used funds from a Delta Dental grant to purchase more equipment.

“Now we fill cavities and perform simple extractions for patients within their own nursing homes,” Gadbois said. “We used to have to search for community dentists willing to treat Medicaid patients.”

CareLink board President Kevin McKay, who is also CEO and president of Tockwotton on the Waterfront, a nonprofit senior living community in East Providence, said

Gadbois worked hard to ensure Tockwotton had personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Chris and her staff were able to get us things we couldn’t find,” he said. “The first to roll up her sleeves and pitch in with nursing when there were staff shortages, Chris also reassigned rehab specialists when little rehab was going on.”

Recognizing how the pandemic-driven isolation impacted nursing home residents, Gadbois received a Rhode Island Foundation grant to create an interactive TV show. It aired last summer and is now available on CareLink’s website.

“These evidence-based interventions provided residents with some stimulation,” said Gadbois, who partnered on the initiative with a University of Michigan nursing school colleague.

At Gadbois’ initiative, CareLink recently developed a psychiatry consultation program for nursing home residents and group home residents, which the organization is work-

ing to expand. CareLink is also working to establish a “closed-door pharmacy” to provide nursing home residents their medications less expensively and more efficiently. If the R.I. Board of Pharmacy approves the application, the CareLink pharmacy will lead to cost-savings for nursing homes as well.

“Chris’ clinical background and her public health experience were key for us,” said McKay, a member of the search committee who recruited, interviewed and hired Gadbois. “The last couple of years have been extremely challenging. We hired a new CEO, moved our headquarters and lost two member companies. During COVID, one nursing home closed, management staff received no raises, we had to furlough some staff, some of whom came back to us, and Chris maintained staff morale. We lost some revenue [yet] CareLink is stronger financially today ... because of Chris’ leadership and the people she’s brought in.”

Gadbois calls her leadership style “participatory and very hands-on,” adding that it’s critical that everyone be involved to make decisions in a democratic fashion. Gadbois works to develop leaders within CareLink, with a budget of approximately \$7 million and nearly 100 employees.

“It’s critical for leaders to trust their abilities and stretch themselves, so I do lots of leading by example,” she said.

A strong proponent of professional development, Gadbois’ board leadership roles include two terms as past president of the Rhode Island State Nurses Association board and is current president of the Rhode Island Public Health Association board. Asked how she so effectively manages multitasking her myriad commitments, Gadbois, a Cumberland native, said, “I don’t ever sit still.” ■

‘CareLink is **stronger financially today** ... because of Chris’ leadership and the people she’s brought in.’

KEVIN MCKAY, CareLink Inc. board president

Communicating effectively

BY NANCY KIRSCH | Contributing Writer

JESSICA MCCARTHY began her role as vice president of marketing, public relations and communications at Providence-based **Care New England Health System** only weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

By applying her scientific research, data analysis, and marketing and operations strategy skills gained in positions at research labs at Mars Inc. and CVS Health Corp., McCarthy transformed how CNE, one of Rhode Island's leading hospital systems, communicates with its multiple constituencies.

Committed to "being adaptable, being grateful for what I have, using data and creating a complementary team whose members build on others' strengths," McCarthy attributes her career's twists and turns to moving every 18 months with her family while her husband served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When I came to CNE, I focused on issues that matter to potential patients and [built] a framework ... that allowed team members to

use their expertise, and I focused the team on three pillars: public relations and communications, marketing brand and campaign, and digital/web for the hospital system," she said.

Given data's value in science, the health care industry and marketing, McCarthy said she made sure "people were leaning into data and understanding what was and wasn't working. Now, we have web platforms, partner relationships and marketing automatization that allow us to gather data and make intelligent decisions."

With a very small staff and the need to disseminate COVID-19 information, McCarthy recruited Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School students to help create meaningful COVID-19



HELPING HANDS: Jessica McCarthy, vice president of marketing, public relations and communications at Care New England Health System, recruited Brown University students to help the health system create meaningful COVID-19 content and present it to the public during the pandemic, and later created a CNE internship program.

PBN PHOTO/TRACY JENKINS

content and present it – in diverse languages – to the public. Later, she created a full internship program benefiting Care New England, which is watching its finances. The interns gain experience, develop a portfolio, and practice resume writing and job interviewing.

"It takes time to create an

internship program, but it's definitely worth it," McCarthy said.

"Mentor the people on your own team, and empower them," said McCarthy, who holds an MBA from Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management. "The people who are most successful are those who help others be successful." ■



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IMPASSIONED TEAM:

Diana Ducharme, partner at Cervenka Green & Ducharme LLC, attributes the boutique real estate law firm's success to not only the passion and dedication she shares with her partners, Jennifer Cervenka and Rachelle Green, but also the respect and admiration they have for one another.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

She's 'vested' in her clients' success

BY JOHN A. LAHTINEN | Contributing Writer

A RHODE ISLAND NATIVE, Cervenka Green & Ducharme LLC partner Diana Ducharme's career began like many other attorneys. As her graduation from Providence College approached, she was encouraged to go to law school by close family friends who were judges.

Ducharme enrolled in Villanova University's Charles Widger School of Law, earning her law degree in 1990 and joining Partridge, Snow & Hahn LLP as an associate that same year.

Over the next nine years, Ducharme diligently worked at advancing her career and also welcomed the first two of her three children. Juggling work and family began to take a toll.

"Like a lot of working parents, I had been wearing two full-time hats," Ducharme said. "Just as I should have been gaining traction professionally, I felt burned out and no longer had the energy or motivation to stay on the traditional path.

"I jumped off of the hamster wheel and decided to take time to rest, recharge and refocus, thinking I would keep my feet in the water working on contract matters for my dad's construction company," she said.

Shortly thereafter, a few of Ducharme's former clients approached her with potential opportunities. Rather than jump back into a traditional in-house position, she worked with each client to develop a flexible schedule that allowed her to choose when and where to work. This approach not only enabled Ducharme to be more present for her children while doing fulfilling legal work but also gave her the very rewarding taste of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency.

In 2005, Ducharme was approached about a position by business law firm Hinckley Allen & Snyder LLP, which had represented the seller in a com-

mercial real estate sale to one of her clients. Presented with the opportunity to retain some flexibility in her scheduling and invigorated to be part of a 20-plus member commercial real estate law department working on complex real estate development and finance legal matters, Ducharme joined the firm.

By 2016, craving the freedom to again pursue her own interests, Ducharme left to start the boutique law firm now called Cervenka Green & Ducharme LLC in Providence with current partners Jennifer Cervenka and Rachelle Green, and their associate, Emily Migliaccio.

These days, at any given time you will find Ducharme and her partners working on a number of real estate development projects, ranging from college graduate student housing, charter

schools, solar farms, health centers, construction and term loans on industrial and mixed-use projects, and even a local farmers market.

"Although a women-owned business is not a unique concept, our firm was founded by women attorneys and is operated and managed 100% by women attorneys," Ducharme said. "We all came together from three different, and at times competing, regional 'big law' firms as a result of relationships we developed over several years. Most importantly, we respected each other's expertise and professional reputation and genuinely liked and admired each other."

Christina Rouse, who heads up marketing and operations at Providence-based Sweeney Real Estate & Appraisal, routinely recommends Ducharme to her clients.

"Diana's work helps businesses in the Rhode Island market stay protected, well-advised and empowered to make strong decisions," Rouse said. "Diana is one of the top real estate lawyers in the state and she is beyond humble.

She not only showcases her leadership through her profession but also through her community action."

Ducharme's community work includes mentoring for Year Up. She is also part of the Diversity & Inclusion Committee for the Providence Foundation.

Four years in, Cervenka Green & Ducharme has experienced great success that Ducharme believes will continue due to the passion and dedication she shares with her partners.

"My work is part of the foundation of my clients' success stories," Ducharme said. "My job is to protect my clients' best legal interests and serve them effectively and efficiently. ... I feel vested personally in each project and outcome." ■

'Diana's work **helps businesses in the Rhode Island market** stay protected, well-advised and empowered to make strong decisions.'

CHRISTINA ROUSE, Sweeney Real Estate & Appraisal director of marketing and operations

Helping identify the right match

BY JENNA PELLETIER | Contributing Writer

MELISSA SHAW DESCRIBES her recruitment consulting business, **Shaw Search Partners LLC**, as a “one-woman show.”

“I make every single decision, oftentimes within a split second,” she said.

Shaw’s personalized, high-touch service has helped set her East Greenwich-based business apart since she founded it in 2010.

Focusing on positions related to marketing, creative, advertising and media, Shaw has provided recruitment expertise for companies such as CVS Health Corp., Fidelity Investments Inc., Hasbro Inc. and Swarovski Optik North America Ltd.

Corporations with in-house recruiting teams might reach out to Shaw for help with an applicant search for various reasons. They might need help finding someone with a unique skill set for an especially difficult role to fill, for example, or be seeking a candidate with expertise in Shaw’s focus area: marketing and creative me-

dia for retail.

After working as a recruiter for Randstad NV’s Providence branch and then in-house at CVS, Shaw launched the business from her home 11 years ago because she wanted the flexibility to spend more time with her son, an infant at the time.

“I started with one client and worked [tirelessly] to organically grow the business to where it is today,” she said.

Since then, Shaw has recruited and placed more than 150 candidates, “with a particular emphasis on hiring female and diverse employees.”

A typical day for Shaw might include helping a candidate polish her resume, formulating a recruitment strategy with a chief marketing officer and negotiating a job offer.

Playing the role of corporate



ON THE LOOKOUT: Melissa Shaw, owner of Shaw Search Partners LLC, says she has recruited and placed more than 150 candidates for her corporate clients since starting the business.

COURTESY HEIDI HOPE PHOTOGRAPHY

matchmaker, Shaw focuses on learning as much as she can about the organization and applicants.

“You want to make sure there’s a long-term fit, and it’s not just placing someone in a position that’s going to end in a year,” she said.

To do that, Shaw studies not only the responsibilities and skill requirements of the specific job but also the organization’s cul-

ture, structure and mission. On the candidate end, she focuses on having in-depth conversations with applicants about what is most important to them.

“People say all the time, ‘Wow, no one has ever really asked me what is truly important to me in my next role,’” she said. “Everyone has different priorities and goals, so understanding them helps us make that perfect match.” ■



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FIRST OF ITS KIND: Karina Holyoak Wood is the founding executive director of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Rhode Island program, which she started from scratch in 2016 in partnership with the Community College of Rhode Island, the first statewide program rollout in the U.S.
PBN PHOTO/TRACY JENKINS

Holyoak Wood getting results for small business

BY JOHN A. LAHTINEN | Contributing Writer

THE GOLDMAN SACHS 10,000 Small Businesses program began as an effort to provide business education, support services and pathways to capital for growth-oriented entrepreneurs.

Today, 10KSB has grown into a world-class entrepreneurship education program. It enables small-business owners to step away from their day-to-day operations and focus on growth through professional workshops covering topics that can be put into action immediately such as negotiation, financial analysis, marketing and employee management.

Open and free of charge to small-business owners from any industry sector and delivered in partnership with local academic institutions, the program has served more than 10,000 businesses nationwide. In Rhode Island, 352 businesses have taken advantage of the program, which operates in partnership with the **Community College of Rhode Island**.

Karina Holyoak Wood is the founding executive director of Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses at CCRI – the first statewide program rollout in the United States. Holyoak Wood started the Rhode Island program from scratch in 2016 and over the past five years, she has spearheaded the successful recruitment of hundreds of Ocean State small-business owners. The program has made an impact not only on the businesses that participate but on the local economy as well, with 67% of graduates reporting increased revenues and nearly 50% of graduates reporting new job creation within six months.

“It is a privilege to be able to work with hundreds of passionate, innovative and dedicated entrepreneurs and to be able to help and support them to discover their next opportunity and help them to manifest it,” she said.

The program is currently running its summer cohort – the 14th state cohort to date – and actively recruiting applicants for the upcoming fall cohort, which starts in September.

Holyoak Wood believes that the program’s success rests in the combination of tools, resources and support it provides. This includes education, one-on-one business advising, a network of diverse peers, the opportunity to access capital, and an education curriculum designed by faculty and practitioners at Babson College and Goldman Sachs.

“Participants often describe our program as a ‘mini MBA for small businesses’ because it is an intensive program specifically tailored to the needs of growth-minded small businesses who are past the startup phase and are ready to scale and add employees through exploring and implementing a new product, service and/or market that can drive their growth,” Holyoak Wood said. “The ‘toolkit’ for assess-

ing a new growth opportunity that we teach is unique to our program and can be used over and over again by entrepreneurs as their businesses grow.”

During her career, Holyoak Wood has always enjoyed bringing people together to build and run goal-oriented campaigns, organizations and coalitions that seek to improve the quality of life for the greater community. To that end, she has worked on an array of policy areas over the years, including arms control, nuclear disarmament, gun control, improving public schools, equitable state education funding, increasing civic engagement in public policymaking, urban design, government transparency, tobacco control, and lung cancer prevention and treatment.

According to Layne Mayer, director of growth at protective equipment and durable accessories manufacturer Amerisewn in Cranston, it is that very dedication and passion that has enabled Holyoak Wood to bring success to the 10KSB R.I. program.

“Karina has always been engaged in her local community as a volunteer advocate, demonstrating strong leadership to achieve results,” Mayer said. “Getting results is what she does and what she is known for.”

Holyoak Wood says this is the best job she’s ever had, allowing her to bring together a deep interest in economic development and community building with her love of working with many different kinds of people, and a passion for education and advocacy.

“I love leading a team, building an organization and getting results,” she said. “It is highly rewarding work to be able to support entrepreneurs to create jobs and improve the quality of life in our state.” ■

‘It is highly rewarding work to be able to support entrepreneurs to create jobs.’

KARINA HOLYOAK WOOD,
Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses
Rhode Island executive director

Ensuring seniors are fed and safe

BY JOHN A. LAHTINEN | Contributing Writer

AS A LIFELONG Rhode Islander, Meghan Grady is passionate about the people here and the things that impact their lives.

Early in her life, Grady knew she wanted to give back through public and community service. In college, she interned for U.S. Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., and U.S. Rep. Marty Meehan, D-Mass. Her first job was serving as a legislative page at the R.I. Senate.

After working as chief operating officer for YWCA Rhode Island for nearly nine years, Grady accepted the role of executive director at **Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island** in the summer of 2019.

Grady says she draws upon those past experiences regularly in her new role.

“My work ethic and positive attitude helped me gain trust and respect early on in my career,” Grady said. “I have a deep gratitude for those who believed in my ability from an early age, gave me opportunities and helped me refine

my leadership skills.”

As the state’s only nonprofit home-delivered meal program, Meals on Wheels has served almost 20 million home-delivered meals in the state. Operating without disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has home-delivered nearly 350,000 meals and an additional 275,000 emergency response meals.

Grady is quick to underscore not just the importance of the meals themselves but also her team and the commitment of the program’s many volunteers.

“Our program is so much more than a meal,” Grady said, “it’s also a lifesaving safety check and opportunity for socialization. During the pandemic, many of our clients shared that the Meals on Wheels of R.I. volunteer or delivery driver was the only person with whom



WELL-PREPARED: Meghan Grady, executive director of Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island, said the nonprofit is focusing on innovating and modernizing its programming in preparation to meet an increased need for its services.

PBN PHOTO/ ELIZABETH GRAHAM

they regularly interacted. Our more-than-a-meal model not only helped them stay fed and safe at home but also helped them to feel less lonely and isolated.”

Grady said Rhode Island will add 100,000 older adults to its popu-

lation in the next 10 years. “That will mean more seniors will be in need of our services,” she said. “As an organization, we are focusing on how we innovate and modernize our programming to be prepared to meet this increased need.” ■

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CULTURE CHANGE: Rebecca Chhim's colleagues at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division Newport have observed the change in culture she's brought since being promoted to director of cybersecurity undersea warfare combat system integration for submarines and USW systems, "changing the conversation of cybersecurity from compliance to securing tactical and business systems and quantifying risk accurately."

PBN PHOTO/KATE WHITENEY LUCEY

NUWC's Chhim brings team approach to cybersecurity

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

REBECCA CHHIM'S MOUTHFUL of a job title only begins to describe her work and its effect on others. Officially, it's director of cybersecurity undersea warfare combat system integration for submarines and USW systems at the **Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division Newport**, a shore command of the U.S. Navy.

"My kids have just started saying that I'm a cybersecurity director," she acknowledged, with an understanding tone.

But neither job description seems to adequately communicate the culture of change Chhim's colleagues say she has strategized, implemented and managed since being promoted to her current role in December 2020.

Born in Virginia and raised in Fall River, Chhim was always interested in information technology but came to the cybersecurity arena quite by accident.

In 2000, after graduating from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Chhim was happily working in software development as an intern. Company budget cuts brought that work to a halt but the firm offered her a position in a new area, then called "information assurance."

Reluctantly, she accepted.

"Information assurance, or IA, is what we now know as cybersecurity," Chhim said. "It was very unknown. But I as I learned more about it, I remember thinking, 'Holy cow. This is awesome.'"

Chhim began at NUWC Division Newport in 1998 as an acquisition intern in the Unmanned Undersea Vehicle Department. Her job was to ensure cybersecurity architecture and systems engineering requirements were in compliance. She went on to serve myriad roles, all related to cybersecurity.

Most recently, she was deputy department head for cybersecurity,

heading a major effort to modernize the command's computer infrastructure, adding new technology and capability while balancing cyber risk.

As a senior scientist and technical manager, Chhim's focus is on ensuring long-term fleet cyber readiness. She sees cybersecurity as a team sport in achieving that goal.

Chhim said she focuses on the cyber framework, "building the road while we're driving on it" for the command, which is seven technical departments and several business departments. She is radically altering any previous notions of cybersecurity as reactionary, and her colleagues are taking notice.

"Ms. Chhim has fostered innovative approaches that changed the conversation of cybersecurity from compliance to securing tactical and business systems and quantifying risk accurately," said Marie Bussiere, USW Combat Systems department head.

'I told them no ideas were too crazy or too big. ... We succeed by supporting and lifting others.'

Rebecca Chhim, NUWC cybersecurity director

The process has included gathering IT department members' input, which turned out to be an enlightening, inspiring experience that is right in Chhim's wheelhouse, according to Vicki Comeau, head of the Corporate Operations Department.

Comeau says Chhim excels at making sure all parts of an organization know they are valuable, as she did with the IT division.

"It was their time to shine," Chhim said, with IT divisions generally only called upon to respond to computer problems and their corresponding tickets. "It was amazing how many ideas they had. We made it a panel [similar to] the show 'Shark Tank.' I told them no ideas were too crazy or too big. Some people who were very shy actually brainstormed the best ideas. We used those ideas and took them to the next level," she said, with strong backing from senior leadership. "I loved it. We succeed by supporting and lifting others."

"She is an exceptional problem-solver," Comeau said of Chhim.

Chhim looks to professionally mentor where opportunities present themselves. She tries to get women she encounters at professional settings out of their comfort zones.

"I want them to know that they shouldn't settle, that they should keep pushing boundaries," Chhim said. "I tell them, 'Let's pull that thread and see where it takes you. Do it through work. Regret is heavier than working hard.'"

Chhim's sons, 15 and 20, send their friends to her for advice as well, she said. Her sons also serve an important role in reminding Chhim of her own work-life balance rules – necessary boundaries for busy leaders – and she welcomes the accountability check.

"They call me out," she said. "I don't want their phones at the dinner table, so they'll let me know when I'm in violation." ■

Baranyk finds her calling in buildings

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

WITH HER OWN French-Canadian and Irish ancestors having ties to Newport, Andrea Baranyk has always loved genealogy research.

It makes sense then, as a principal with **Northeast Collaborative Architects** in North Kingstown, that historic preservation of structures and the stories that emerge from that work resonate with her as well.

"I found my calling in the transformation of historic buildings," she said. "I enjoy discovering what was built and why."

While she appreciates what modern technology can accomplish, such as lasers that sense where water damage is located so that it can be addressed without having to rip apart the wall of an aged structure, Baranyk still has a healthy respect for traditional approaches, such as talking and listening to people.

"I've got my iPhone, but it's also good to have tactile connections. With historic redevelopment, it's all about how it needs

to function by the end user," she said. "We must ask the best questions, and listening is key. We need to understand what clients are looking for – not what they are told they need."

Baranyk began a five-year Roger Williams University architecture degree track in 1994 but switched her major to historic preservation, graduating with a minor concentration in architecture. She gained work experience at a Connecticut architectural firm, later returning to RWU to complete the bachelor's degree in architecture, finishing up the remaining requirements.

Baranyk became an owner at Northeast Collaborative Architects after just five years as an architect with the company. In 2018, she and three new partners took over full ownership from the founding partners. Baranyk is a



HIT THE GROUND RUNNING: Shortly after joining Northeast Collaborative Architects, where she is now a principal, Andrea Baranyk served as project manager and oversaw the transformation of The Arcade indoor mall in Providence from design to construction.

PBN PHOTO/TRACY JENKINS

licensed architect in five states.

An award-winning architect known for her sustainability focus, Baranyk's portfolio includes office space, residential projects, municipal structures, educational facilities and luxury hotels. But her favorite is The Arcade in Providence, the nation's oldest indoor mall.

Baranyk had just started with Northeast Collaborative when she took on the landmark's transformation as a project manager, overseeing work from design to construction.

"I've enjoyed getting it through its code challenges and delays to see it continue to be successful," she said. ■

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An idea she didn't let go to waste

BY JENNIFER L. GRYBOWSKI | Contributing Writer

THINK ABOUT ANY DIRTY, feces-related joke, and Cassie Collinson guarantees she has heard it.

"People find out what I do and like to tell me jokes," she said. "It doesn't bother me."

That's because Collinson is the owner of **Cassie's Cans Inc.**, a port-a-potty rental company for construction sites, based in South Kingstown. It also doesn't bother Collinson, or her all-female crew, to work in a male-dominated industry.

"It's truly not a tough world to be in," she said. "We treat the guys with respect, and they do the same back."

So how does a young woman end up in the port-a-potty industry?

"I worked with sewer lines at my dad's roofer company and got my feet wet with blue-collar work in the waste industry," Collinson said. "I got the idea I wanted to start a business and my dad and I were throwing ideas around and sort of jokingly said I should start

a Porta-John business."

The idea stuck with her, and within a few months, she had secured financing and started her own business. She was 19 and had a couple of portable toilets she was ferrying to some local sites operated by friends. By the time she was 20, she had a full-blown rental business on her hands.

"I was trying to understand business and what it means and build it up on paper," Collinson said. "Who do I buy chemicals from? How do I get a state ID? What insurance do I need? As far as growing a business, you truly only learn in those dark, nitty-gritty moments."

Fortunately, the pandemic didn't affect her bottom line as much as it did in some industries.

"COVID-19 actually gave us a



LIFE OF THE POTTY: Cassie Collinson says she's learned a lot since starting Cassie's Cans Inc. six years ago, when she was 19. The South Kingstown company rents portable toilets for construction sites. PBN FILE PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

little bit of business," she said. "Most sites stayed open as long as they were within regulations."

She's learned a lot over six years.

"I've messed up in all departments and learned from it in all departments," Collinson

said. "Now I'm in a position where I feel a little more confident with anything that gets put in my lap. If there is a mess-up, I can tackle it. That growth is something I'm super proud of. I would never have pictured myself being able to do it." ■

Crum packs plenty of energy, empathy

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

CONSIDERING CHRISTINE SOAVE CRUM'S high-energy approach to work and life, it's fitting that she owns a moving company.

After all, she's accustomed to putting things in motion in more ways than one, whether its relocating contents of a house or advancing her education, company or career. A friend once put it to Crum this way: "If you are sitting still, something is wrong."

Crum owns Cranston's **Gentry Inc.**, doing business as Gentry Moving and Storage with 25 employees, it's a \$2 million to \$3 million company in a male-dominated industry.

Crum's path to leading the company full time took some twists and turns. She began in a different field, as an educator. In the classroom for over 14 years, she found her niche at the middle school level. She taught in Central Falls schools for several years and was happy teaching subjects such as nutrition, dating violence, human body systems, fire safety and bike safety.

Crum then said job requirements for health educators changed. Health educators were told they would need to also be physical educators, too, certified in health and adaptive physical education. In 2013, she said, four health educators at her school, all without the proper certifications, lost their positions. So, Crum turned her full attention to the moving company, which had been growing in the background. She went from working in public education to overseeing property relocations.

"I say that I went from manag-



ALL-IN: Christine Soave Crum, left, owner of Gentry Moving and Storage in Cranston, accepts a delivery of office furniture from Don Erickson of Aspen Transport Service. Crum worked full time as a teacher when she founded the moving company with a partner in 2005 but now focuses all of her attention on Gentry. PBN FILE PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

ing little people to managing big people," she said with a laugh. "I prefer little people. They are more malleable."

Not everyone has family members nearby who can assist in those types of moves. "We work hand in hand with [the seniors], helping them navigate," Crum said.

Crum feels that Gentry's handling of all its clients is buoyed by

its female staff members. Customers who call to request moving services are not always calling for happy reasons. People move due to the death of a loved one, divorce, job loss and other sad circumstances, Crum pointed out.

"I feel we give more [of] an empathetic, caring approach to those phone calls," she said. "My staff takes the time to listen – and it's often a female who is calling." ■

Upbringing put her career into focus

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

THE WORD “FAMILY” in Duquette Family Eye Care Inc. of North Smithfield means much more than just a business willing to serve families in the community.

That is part of what the business does, of course. But there is also a super-sized family dynamic behind the company that truly differentiates it, according to owner Lori Duquette – and it comes with built-in workplace benefits.

Duquette was born into a family in Central Falls with 11 children – seven boys and four girls – that includes two sets of twins and a set of triplets, and parents married for more than 65 years.

“Growing up in such a loud, active household has really taught me how to focus,” said Duquette, who remembers doing homework and blocking out the noise of many siblings around her. She now sees the benefits of being raised in such a large family and leverages those benefits as she leads her company.

Duquette’s twin sister Linda is the eye care center’s director of operations. Linda’s daughter

handles appointment confirmation calls. Their sister-in-law Kathy Duquette is the resident optician, and niece Meghan Duquette is assistant manager. In turn, patients who come to Duquette Family Eye Care are treated to a family-oriented, family-centered practice, Lori Duquette said.

Duquette said her staff is committed to professional development and equipping the practice with the very latest technological advances. Patients have access to highly specialized diagnostic tests such as optic nerve scans, for example.

“We call it old-fashioned care in a state-of-the-art facility,” she said. “That’s our culture.”

Having practiced now for two decades, Duquette’s educational road to optometry was not a completely straight path.

Educating patients on how



STAYING SHARP: Lori Duquette, owner of Duquette Family Eye Care Inc., says her upbringing in a large family taught her skills that have helped her run her own business.

PBN FILE PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

changes in the eyes can indicate changes in the body is another part of her role, she said.

Since 2000, Duquette has been the Special Olympics Lions’ Club International Opening Eyes Program’s clinical director. The volunteer program offers free eye health exams, vision screenings

and eyewear to the athletes who compete at the Rhode Island Special Olympics each summer at the University of Rhode Island.

Duquette said the work was rewarding, as she saw progress in an underserved population realizing the importance of regular vision care. ■

Career path not by design

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

CAREERS DON’T ALWAYS follow a predictable path, and that’s OK. Sheryl Guglielmo of DiPrete Engineering Associates Inc. may argue that it often works out better that way.

Promoted to senior project manager earlier last year, Guglielmo is a successful team member at the Cranston-based civil engineering firm. But she’s not a civil engineer. She’s an architect, one who has been with DiPrete for 14 years. In that time, she and the firm have evolved, grown and excelled.

“We know what we are good at,” Guglielmo said.

The road to empowering realizations for both Guglielmo and the company has been paved with a healthy combination of opportunity, education, open-mindedness and industry involvement.

Where her skills may not have been an exact fit with the land-planner opening at DiPrete, the company was a match with what she sought in an employer. Guglielmo said the firm was growing and getting noticed for projects, fitting

the bill as a company where she could have a career, not just a job.

Guglielmo knew AutoCAD, design software used by architects and engineers. For many other parts of the job, however, “I didn’t know what I was doing,” she said. At least not at first.

Dennis DiPrete, company founder and president, has been a supportive mentor, she said. Colleagues learned from her perspective, and she from them. The firm was doing a lot of residential work at that time, such as master planning of neighborhood subdivisions.

But when the housing crisis hit in 2008, the company, like so many others, had to pivot.

Residential work went away. Guglielmo said that about half of the company’s 60 employees were laid off. DiPrete began taking on commercial developments.



EMPOWERED: Sheryl Guglielmo, senior project manager for DiPrete Engineering Associates Inc., joined the civil engineering firm as an architect but has worked her way up to become a senior project manager.

PBN FILE PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

In this way, she found work that speaks to her: projects with lots of moving parts.

Guglielmo, who earned her Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification in 2009, said that commercial projects are now 80% of the company’s portfolio.

Guglielmo said women need to be empowered, even if they find

they are the youngest one and the only woman in a conference room full of engineers whose experience may not line up exactly with theirs.

“I went to school for architectural engineering and I’m in a civil engineering world. Everyone I work with has a civil engineering background,” she said. “And I love it here.” ■

Cooking up ways to tackle adversity

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

LISA MATTIELLO HAS ALWAYS loved food, beverages and occasions for people to gather.

Growing up in Warwick in a family with five children – she was the second-youngest child but the oldest girl – Mattiello has been cooking “full-blown” holiday dinners since she was 11.

She is now CEO of Providence-based **Pranzi Inc.**, a catering and events-planning business she started 23 years ago in a small storefront in Seekonk. Independence is a theme with Mattiello. She likes to take charge and is good at getting the job done.

Mattiello – whose husband is a cousin of former House Speaker Nicholas A. Mattiello – said that in the height of wedding season, she has about 180 employees. That number was at about 55 or 60 as of February 2021 because COVID-19 upended the catering industry.

Mattiello said millions of dollars in business was canceled when venues were not permitted to host weddings in the early months of

the pandemic last year.

All was not lost, however.

“Some brides put their weddings in backyards, in which case, we do tents and rentals,” Mattiello said. “We appreciate our relationships with other venues. I feel as if there is enough business for everyone to play nicely together.”

When the coronavirus first struck, Mattiello said, there was confusion about the rules for caterers. “You could go to a restaurant with 200 people, but I could only have 10 [people] at an outdoor wedding? A wedding is different. You know who they are, their phone number, it’s like built-in contact tracing,” she said.

She credited Dale J. Venturini,



CREATIVE THINKING: Lisa Mattiello, CEO of catering and events-planning business Pranzi Inc. in Providence, has had to think outside the box to develop alternative sources of revenue amid the COVID-19 pandemic. PBN FILE PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

CEO and president of the Rhode Island Hospitality Association, as being an ally. “There were lots of Zoom calls” as the association leadership worked to get caterers’ questions answered, Mattiello said.

Luckily, Pranzi had diversified its offerings years ago in order to give its staff winter hours, which has helped to soften the blow of wedding cancellations. Its grab-and-go line of soups, salads and sandwiches, Nicole’s Gourmet – named after Mattiello’s daughter – has been available at Seasons

Corner Markets in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Pranzi also had boxed meals available for pickup or delivery for health care workers, families, work crews, or for large or small events.

Pranzi is set up to supply boxed meals on a last-minute basis, making it possible to do such things as feed hardworking snow removal crews this past winter, said Mattiello. That fast-action ability is helping to further offset COVID-19 event losses. ■

Running iced tea company is sweet

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

KELLEY MCSHANE EXPERIENCED the small-state connectivity of doing business in Rhode Island in the midst of becoming a partner-owner of Providence-based **The Granny Squibb Co. LLC** with her husband, Nick Carr.

The business transaction in 2018 had a decidedly intimate, laid-back feel that seems uniquely characteristic to the Ocean State.

The couple’s downstairs neighbor, Robin Squibb, founded the organic iced tea company in 2007 based on her grandmother’s recipe. Squibb was looking for new partners to expand Granny Squibb’s New England presence.

McShane and Carr, a financial adviser, had been looking for an opportunity in which the couple could work together. “We needed to trust the people we’d be working with and have a great story to build upon,” McShane said.

“One day, Robin and Nick saw each other on the way inside [their apartment building] after she’d had a challenging day and she just said, ‘Do you want to buy

an iced tea company?’ ” McShane said. “He later told me, we looked at each other and it just clicked. We knocked on her door and said, ‘Were you serious?’ She said, ‘Absolutely.’ ”

After McShane and Carr became partner-owners of Granny Squibb, they were talking one night as they headed to dinner at Providence’s Troop restaurant about how they needed to call Providence Mayor Jorge O. Elorza’s office the next day to ask a business question.

When they walked into the restaurant, Elorza coincidentally was sitting at a table alone and accessible.

“This kind of thing happens all the time here,” McShane said. “It’s so Rhode Island and I love it.”

The original Granny Squibb,



WELL-CONNECTED: Kelley McShane, partner-owner of The Granny Squibb Co. LLC, enjoys the small-state connectivity of doing business in Rhode Island, which makes key players and leaders accessible. PBN FILE PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

Robin’s grandmother, made the legendary iced tea from her kitchen overlooking Narragansett Bay. The company has been a longtime supporter of Save The Bay Inc., nonprofit advocate for Narragansett Bay. A portion of the revenue from the Charlie’s Cranberry iced tea benefits Save The Bay.

McShane said the company was forced to quickly transition in the pandemic to beef up its online

sales and home delivery services.

“Our sales did not meet our original targets for March and April [2020], but considering we are amidst a surprise ... pandemic, I think we are doing pretty well,” she said.

The business also has ramped up charity outreach, donating tea to groups such as Family Service of Rhode Island Inc., first responders and others. ■

Weathering every storm

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

A THEME EMERGES when you speak with Susan Mocarski, owner and principal designer of rain apparel company **Cleverhood LLC**. The very ideals she has put to work in starting and operating her 10-year-old company have created products that are essentially tools for others to do the same.

“It’s about getting out – rain or shine – and not retreating,” she said of the Providence company’s high-performance rain poncho. “It’s about being a participant in where you live.”

Mocarski launched Cleverhood in 2012, producing rain capes designed for people who want to get to work wearing a dress or suit and still arrive looking professional.

The first garments were made in a Newark, N.J., factory. Now Cleverhood’s design and shipping departments are based in Providence, with manufacturing in various U.S. locations and Vietnam.

The rain capes have functional, quality features with local sourcing such as YKK zippers; armholes

that – with some help from magnets – snap shut to keep the rain out; a hood designed to maximize peripheral vision; reflective 3M piping; and elastic thumb loops to keep the cape in place when biking.

Mocarski is the sole designer, with the multiskilled Cleverhood team totaling four, including one of her sons and a longtime family friend. A network of trusted subcontractors keeps things running smoothly. She prefers keeping the company small and tight, utilizing all available resources to their maximum capacity and being able to pivot when necessary.

Mocarski has received support from the R.I. Commerce Corp. and the John H. Chafee Center for



STOCKED UP: Susan Mocarski, owner and principal designer of Cleverhood LLC, checks the inventory in the company’s Providence retail store. PBN FILE PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

International Business at Bryant University. The Chafee Center helped Cleverhood – which saw a dip in sales due to the COVID-19 pandemic – strengthen its exporting program.

Cleverhood’s other support system is comprised of its customers. Calling them “oddly specific,” they consistently offer feedback on product features. Being a nimble company also means that custom-

ers can and do see changes they suggest made in as little as four weeks, Mocarski said.

Cleverhood’s future may involve the inclusive marketplace. With an outerwear product for people who use a wheelchair, the company is in the process of becoming a brand offered on Juniper Unlimited, an inclusive and accessibility-minded e-commerce marketplace. ■

A ‘Penney’ for their thoughts

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

PART OF CAROLE ANN PENNEY’S ROLE as a business leadership coach is being a myth buster.

Cultural notions of achieving a successful career by a series of predetermined steps have evolved, Penney points out. Gone are the stringent expectations that every employee will graduate from a four-year college with a degree in their chosen field and climb the corporate ladder, earning sequential promotions and positions within that field.

The founder of Smithfield-based **Penney Leadership LLC**, Penney works at building clients’ skills in areas such as leading in a crisis, leveraging networks and setting effective goals. But society’s notions on what constitutes a successful career are often outdated, she said.

“The idea of a linear path is a false one,” Penney said. “Being a doctor or lawyer or accountant ... there are so many choices even within those fields. As a nurse, for example, you can be in a school or hospital or visiting in homes.

“There are a lot more decisions to make” compared to the collective view of such professions decades ago, she said.

The path to her own professional purpose – leadership coaching – was sparked after Penney took part in a Brown University “Life After Graduation” panel discussion. On the panel, Penney found herself comparing her career path in the nonprofit sector with that of her peers. They all appeared to have found their purpose, while her resume appeared to be more random than strategic, she said.

Penney set about establishing her own inner leadership compass. As she continued to refine her management and coaching skills, Penney took on more-senior titles over the next seven years. She began acquiring credentials that would allow her to help others become grounded in their leadership skills and define their vision



PURPOSE FINDER: Carole Ann Penney, owner of Penney Leadership LLC, said most of her coaching clients are seeing meaning in their work and the career path they’re on. PBN FILE PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

of success.

In 2017, Penney began leading Penney Leadership full time and she served 70 clients in 2019. Most, she said, were midlevel professionals who were in some stage of transition.

“Executive coaches are around; I’m there for everybody else,” she said. “Clients come to me when they get a little lost. They want to be more intentional about where they want to go next and there is

momentum in that experience to launch them.”

A common theme among Penney’s clients: a desire for work with purpose. Leaders want to feel they are receiving value and that they are valuable, with research showing it is key to employee satisfaction and retention.

This sense of value, and the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction it brings, is unique to each of Penney’s clients, and to herself. ■

ACHIEVEMENT HONOREE STEPHANIE ROBAT | FR Engineering Group Inc.

She had plans right from the start

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

AS FAR BACK as she can remember, Stephanie Robat wanted to be an engineer, a la her father, Robert Fairbanks, who owns Fairbanks Engineering Corp. in Exeter.

Now, Robat is president and owner of **FR Engineering Group Inc.** of Warwick, a geotechnical, geostructural and waterfront engineering firm. Her husband, Shane – like her, a University of Rhode Island graduate – is the company’s vice president. The “FR” in the company name represents Stephanie’s maiden name, Fairbanks, and Shane’s last name, Robat.

Robat launched the firm in 2019 and began slowly building a client list, only to have COVID-19 hit not long afterward. From a marketing standpoint, she remembers planning to attend networking events to promote the new company, events that were all canceled. But Robat said construction was luckily not an industry as drastically affected by the virus. There was a hiccup in activity but overall, businesses in the sector forged ahead.

“Some municipalities put future projects on hold to figure out budgets, or there was a lull in public bids for design phases. But we have not seen too much of a downturn in the amount of work,” Robat said.

The firm continues to stay the course and steadily build its client list. Robat said that geotechnical, geostructural and waterfront engineering delivers a sense of satisfaction that keeps motivation high and reinforces her career choice.

The type of work a client requires dictates when FR Engineering is involved, Robat said, and can vary greatly. The firm is more of an upfront consultant for geotechnical work, for example, when a project is in planning phases. For oversight work, they can be involved on the tail end. Waterfront design – which Robat likes best due



HANDS-ON: Stephanie Robat, owner of FR Engineering Group Inc., prepares to examine a core sample brought up by a drill rig on a work site in Warwick. PBN FILE PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

to its creative nature – can require FR Engineering to be part of the team from start to finish. “It all depends on how long planning and construction take,” Robat said.

Robat said being a woman in construction calls for thick skin. Though she’s seen more female representation in the male-dominated field, she has still witnessed sexist comments and hostile attitudes. Her father taught her to

never take anything personally, as contractors and engineers just don’t always get along anyway, no matter the gender, especially as project complications develop and deadlines loom.

“It’s business,” Robat said. “My father has always been big on the fact that you just can’t take too many things to heart. There can be tension, and you can’t take it personally.” ■

ACHIEVEMENT HONOREE YEMI SEKONI | Donahue Models & Talent LLC

Passions lead to fashionable career

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

YEMI SEKONI, owner and director of **Donahue Models & Talent LLC** in Cranston, is pulled in many different directions, driven by a love of fashion and engagement.

In addition to overseeing the modeling agency, Sekoni is president and creative director of Lights|Fashion|Philanthropy, the fashion-event production and entertainment arm of the agency; founder and creative director of Rhode Island Fashion Week; and publisher and editor-in-chief of Trade Secrets, an online magazine for the modeling industry.

It’s not unusual for Sekoni to be juggling multiple projects at once, all while she’s dreaming up ideas for new projects then acting quickly on them. “I am super organized and cannot function if there is too much disorder,” she said.

Her journey to becoming a small-business owner took a roundabout path. Sekoni worked in banking, mainly business development, in the early to mid-2000s, for the former FleetBoston Financial and for Citizens Bank N.A., be-

fore taking a role as special events manager at Homefront Health Care in Pawtucket from 2008 to 2010.

Along the way, Sekoni “fueled [her] soul” by auditioning for acting jobs. In about 2005, she sought to improve her articulation and stage presence, getting instruction at Donahue Models & Talent.

Little did she know that the agency’s founder, Annette Donahue, had other plans.

Sekoni joined the agency as a model in 2005, at age 30. But Donahue, who founded the business in 1973, was looking for someone to buy it and run it with the same care and passion she had.

“She kind of identified my enthusiasm and decided to start involving me behind the scenes to pull clothes for shows,” Sekoni said of Donahue. “She began to mentor me, asked me about my citizenship status, my background.”



ON LOCATION: Donahue Models & Talent LLC owner Yemi Sekoni directs, from left, Ruby Boesch and Molly McBride during a recent photo shoot at the Temple to Music in Roger Williams Park in Providence. The photographer is Yan La Mort. PBN FILE PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

It took Sekoni 18 months to put together the business plan to buy the agency 10 years ago. She now reflects on how incredible the relationship and experience has been for two women whose backgrounds had been so different.

The COVID-19 pandemic hurt business, but work has picked up lately. Photo shoots are now spread over days to prevent having too many people together on location, Sekoni said.

Sekoni launched Fashion Fete under the Lights|Fashion|Philanthropy umbrella, running YouTube virtual fashion shows with designers from all over the globe.

Sekoni said she believes the pandemic has also brought more of an eco-chic, bohemian vibe to fashion, with so many people taking time at home to clean out their closets and form outfits with clothing they already own. ■

The properties of a leader

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

RITA DANIELLE STEELE has had to make some adjustments in how her company, **Steele Realty Consultants International LLC**, does business in response to COVID-19. But with the technological tools that have come into the real estate industry over the years, these adjustments have been manageable.

The 6-year-old Providence company and its 10 employees serve international buyers. So Steele and her team had already been showing and selling properties remotely using video tours and other methods. The COVID-19 pandemic expanded the need for those remote services.

In-person property showings during the pandemic meant it became more crucial to think beyond the staging of houses, including deep cleaning them, Steele said. "Sanitation levels have certainly been more at the forefront" of properties being sold, she said.

Reduced work hours for an office administration staffer was the only other real change Steele

Realty Consultants International saw from COVID-19. As the state started to reopen, Steele has let local buyers and agents take the lead in how they handle things, depending on their own individual comfort levels.

"Some have wanted masks and booties. Others are fine without them. It just varies. A lot of buyers do initial viewings virtually and then a lot will do it all remote," Steele said.

The creation of Steele Realty Consultants International was an effort to "shift us into a broader range," with more-unique real estate needs, such as clients who seek to build tiny houses as accessory units on existing land, for



CHANGE-MAKER: Rita Danielle Steele, right, owner of Steele Realty Consultants International LLC, meets with Shamila Ahmed, an associate broker.

PBN FILE PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

example, Steele said.

Even as principal of a real estate consultancy with services that include foreclosures, relocations and investments, Steele's passion for activism continues. As board vice president of the Providence Preservation Society, Steele said her interests are evolving yet again.

"My motivation has shifted from preserving for property beauty into showing how that

property contributes to its surrounding environment" as mindful city planning, she said.

Steele is treasurer and president-elect of the Greater Providence Board of Realtors as well, which gave her its Realtor of the Year Award in 2018. "So I'm involved in the political side ... and working with the Rhode Island political leaders to develop legislation that relates to the real estate industry," she said. ■

The drive to push forward

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

EVEN AS A KID, Kaitlyn Szczupak loved cars and learning about what made them go. She was 20 when she and her father, Scott, began discussing her taking over his **S&S Transmissions and Auto Repairs Inc.** business in Portsmouth business one day.

Her brother wasn't interested in joining the company. Szczupak, on the other hand, couldn't imagine doing anything else. So she set about learning about the business and soaking up as much of her father's knowledge as she could.

Juggling another part-time job, she worked at the auto shop part time and pursued a degree in business administration at Bristol Community College in Fall River. Szczupak took the multifaceted approach – though requiring a frenetic schedule – because she felt it offered both the hands-on perspective and academic base she needed.

But conversations about taking over the company were very preliminary. Szczupak's father was only in his late 40s, after all, with retirement far off.

In what Szczupak says felt "like a strange nightmare," the elder Szczupak died suddenly in February 2016. He was 54. Amid the shocking loss, all that she had learned in those college classes kicked in. As Szczupak grieved, she was making sure business matters were handled as well.

"If the company's president is suddenly not here, who signs anything? Who would have the final say, legally?" Szczupak remembers worrying. "After the funeral, I said to my mother, 'I think we all know what I have to do next.'"

Szczupak has excelled over the past five years. The 25-year-old graduated college, relocated S&S Transmissions from Portsmouth to Tiverton, found new customers and navigated the COVID-19 crisis.



LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER: Kaitlyn Szczupak had planned to take over her father's business someday, but when Scott Szczupak died suddenly in 2016, Kaitlyn stepped in much sooner than expected.

PBN FILE PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

The shop closed for two weeks in the spring of 2020 as COVID-19 cases climbed and business lagged. "Remember, we are physically in people's cars, touching their steering wheels," Szczupak said.

Her plan to keep employees and clients safe involved instituting a no-contact car drop-off and pickup system for service, with technicians wearing gloves, masks and sanitizing interior surfaces in addition to other measures.

Finding solutions is a skill in

Szczupak's wheelhouse. With core abilities that seem more innate than learned, she enjoys collaborating with others, being in charge and creating game plans.

In 2019, Szczupak decided to expand her market to reach those customers who were hesitant to come to Aquidneck Island for their auto repair work. It involved securing an SBA 504 loan to buy a building in Tiverton and sorting out logistics of moving heavy machinery to the new site. ■



Tracy McCaughey
Managing Director, Compliance & Ethics

BUILDING LEADERSHIP THROUGH MENTORING

Many women both inside Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and in the community can thank **Tracy McCaughey** for helping them develop skills they didn't realize they had and advancing their careers. Nonprofit leaders in Rhode Island have benefited from Tracy's guidance, and she continues to serve as the executive sponsor of Black Council @ Blue employee business resource group.

Congratulations to Tracy and all the other Business Women Awards honorees!

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