

Early Leaders: Susan Passovoy

by Jenny Erwin
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Susan Passovoy is another member that I had never met and I am sorry that she does not live closer so we could become better acquainted. Every conversation with these early leaders has inspired me and provided much food for thought, and my conversation with Susan was no exception. I know she has many Forum colleagues who value her friendship, her fair mindedness and her practical problem solving. It was interesting to learn how this evolved, and it can be traced back to her family. She described how she was raised in a home that equally valued the sons' and daughters' abilities, skills, and potential and this unbiased upbringing provided her the mindset that 'anything is possible'. I thought about the power of that support and what an impact it could have on all aspects of our work and home environments. That home life as well as her concern for others has taken her in many different directions including various post retirement activities. For example, as a former member of the Swiftsure Ranch Therapeutic Equestrian Center, she worked with the organization to purchase its ranch. Now she is part of their project to establish a retreat camp whose goal is to offer the healing power of nature and recreation to our disabled veterans and their families. She has been true to herself throughout her life and I know she will continue to make a difference and make each moment count.

When did you join IWF and what was your position at that time?

I was a founding member and joined Women's Forum West in 1976. At the time, I was a partner in a small law firm, Elman, Passovoy and Burke and my practice was in real estate and land development.

What were the circumstances that prompted you to become one of the founding members?

I got a phone call from a male colleague who had heard about the organization and thought I should be part of establishing the San Francisco chapter. His encouragement prompted me to reach out to the working group, and they welcomed my participation.

What was the most challenging aspect of your career at the time you joined and how did the organization provide support to help you deal with this?

I grew up in a family where we were treated the same so my parent's expectations for us were not gender based. Since I never experienced any gender discrimination in my family, the idea that females were "less than" males was not part of my consciousness. In fact, when I was in college and the workplace, if there were issues, it



never occurred to me that it might be because I was a female. I attributed any challenges to factors that I could control... preparation, research or strategies. The first and only time I realized that the challenges were due to my gender was in the 80s when I was negotiating a really big deal. I thought I had done everything possible to be successful for my client but the negotiations stalled. Then it hit me that a male attorney might not be having these challenges. I discussed this with my client and suggested that he switch to one of my male partners to complete the deal. His reply....spoken in his delightful southern drawl was, "I will not be deprived of the counsel of my chosen attorney. You are my lawyer and if they have a problem with you then it's their problem!"

What was the major benefit of membership when you joined either WFW or Professional Women's Alliance? What do you see as the major membership benefit now?

I joined the Forum to meet and have social contact with other interesting and fun women. Even though I was one of the first female attorneys in commercial real estate planning, and land development, I did not join for the networking, mentoring or business contacts. Rather it was about building friendships and learning about the other members' work and lives. In the early years, I was more involved and eagerly anticipated the international events. I remember one exceptional conference in China when we worked with women in Beijing and Shanghai to help them organize their Forum.

Now that I live in Idaho, I also belong to the Forum here. I look forward to getting to know these women and participating in their programs whenever I can. I see the membership benefits the same now as they were when I joined....meeting interesting women, learning about a variety of subjects, and having fun. Of course there are also networking and business benefits as well—even though I am not practicing law any more.

How were you involved with the merger of these two groups into WFW?

I was very involved with the merger and remember working closely with Susan Bird from the Professional Women's Alliance and Judith Johnson from the Forum to combine these groups. It was an intense time bringing both groups together but we all worked hard to overcome the challenges by creating a unified professional organization known today as IWF.

It's been 35 + years since IWF started and do you think it's easier now for women in your field to advance to the top leadership roles? Why or why not?

In most ways, it is much easier today. There are more women attending law school, more entering a variety of practices and more attaining partnerships. I saw this trend changing when I was in law school. During my first year, less than 1% of the graduates were women, then it increased to 5% and finally in my graduating class, 10% were women. According to the 2014 American Bar Association Commission on Women in the

Profession study, 47% of law school graduates are women, and women now represent 34% of the total legal profession.

Now I do think it's more challenging for women lawyers in a business environment especially within the Fortune 500 firms as men still dominate and control that culture. An example was when I was brought into a firm as a partner to do a certain project, but the Senior Partners inexplicably seemed determined to block my success. This was another wake up call, so I left after deciding that my life was too short to tolerate this treatment. The man who was hired to replace me was not able to get them to budge either! So it seems important to realize that resistance to change--even if that change is beneficial for the organization--is not necessarily gender based.

What do you see as the current challenges/barriers to women's advancement to the top of their field?

I think there are three barriers that impact women's advancement. First, it's often the lack of an influential network within the organization that is supportive of her advancement. Men usually have this. Secondly, I do believe that women have a responsibility to work at understanding the context and nature of their environment. This means they need to understand what talents are needed and whether theirs is a match. Finally, I do think there is gender bias about our leadership style but women need to work to understand these nuances so they can adapt and use it to their advantage.

There is still tremendous pressure today in the law firm context for both men and women, especially when it comes to billable hours. It's heartbreaking to see people diminished over money or being treated as a mere cog in a wheel. Sadly, I have seen too many people give their power away by trying to be someone else. Be your best self.....because (as the joke goes) the 'everybody else' is already taken.

What are you most proud of in your career and your most significant contribution to your profession?

I am most proud of my continuous striving to be who I am. Sometimes it works and other times it doesn't, but I do believe that being authentic matters. Many years ago while working on a project, I strayed from this. Fortunately, one of my good male friends and colleagues, called me on this. His speaking the truth reinforced my commitment to stay true to who I am. For me that means being present, listening to what people say, being open minded, open hearted and saying what is so.

What was the best advice you got as you climbed the ladder to success? Is it still relevant for aspiring women leaders today?

The best advice I got was not about doing but about being. After I graduated from Berkeley Law School at Boalt Hall, I held four different jobs over the next 10 years. This was a time for me to figure out who I was and what fit my value system. I learned not to be afraid of change and that it was ok to leave and start over. Since our

world and environments are constantly evolving, we need to embrace transition as a way to learn and make new contributions. Yes, I believe it's very relevant today for both women and men leaders to be authentic by staying true to themselves.

Are you currently retired and if so, was it a challenge to make that transition? What helped you successfully navigate retirement?

Yes, I am retired, but I did not have a problem with this change. I think that was because I never based my identity on being a lawyer so not being one did not threaten my perception of myself. While I thoroughly enjoyed my practice in commercial real estate planning and land development, I saw my profession changing from an entrepreneurial focus to a more corporate approach. This was no longer fun for me so I knew it was time to leave which I did 5 years ago. Now I feel blessed to be enjoying a dual life in Idaho and on the California coast. I am very busy with various outdoor activities, plus I am an active volunteer with a women's charitable foundation. Also, I am heading my California home owner's association, which is located in a Nature Conservancy and has many complicated issues—legal and otherwise.

I have 3 simple criteria I use to determine if I will get involved in the organization or project. 1. Will my personal effort make a difference? 2. Do I truly believe in the mission? 3. Will I be working with people I like and respect?

What current programs are of most interest to you and how would you like to be involved with IWF today?

I am opportunistic about the various IWF activities based on my location but I know that all the IWF programs are interesting and educational. They always provide an opportunity to learn something new and to meet interesting women. So when I am in the Bay area and there's a program I will attend that. While, I am not as active with the Idaho group, I am eager to join an upcoming program spending a weekend with a woman rancher in the area.

How do you define success?

*Success is being true to my mission, vision and values. When I complete something, I ask myself if I've done the best of my ability **and** been true to myself. If I can say yes, yes, yes, then I know I am successful.*

Final thoughts

Ellie Guggenheim was such a generous and visionary woman when she helped create the Forum 40 years ago. Her intention to bring women together in non-competitive gatherings to share, learn and have fun provided a missing piece for the top women leaders in the 70's. In 2015, her vision has expanded well beyond the east and west coast boundaries and today IWF continues to provide opportunities for women leaders near and far to learn, grow, share have fun but also to make a difference.

