

Stepping up: NM women business leaders work to level the field

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — For several New Mexico women business leaders, the challenge of an uneven business playing field caused them to step up their game on the uneven terrain.

They've looked to their professional communities for support, particularly from and for other women.

"We've all heard about the good old boys network," said Agnes Noonan, CEO at Wesst. "You don't hear a lot about the good old girls network. There's a lot more room for women to support women – to support and reach out to other women as men have been doing for centuries. More support could be helpful. It's not a competition."

D.J. Heckes, CEO of EXHIB-IT!, a design and display company that specializes in trade show displays and management services, says success is about understanding the big picture and meeting and exceeding expectations.

"I don't think I've been discriminated against," said Heckes. "It's about getting your foot in the door and once established, dressing the part and exuding the part. I thought it was definitely a man's world, but I learned how to build my own credentials."

She has a long list of those. Among them, she's incoming president of NAWBO, National Association of Women Business Owners, an advocacy group for more than 60,000 women business owners. She's been on the board of the Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce and the Albuquerque Independent Business Alliance – "KeepitQUERQUE." She's a mentor for Albuquerque SCORE. She and her business have won dozens of top honors for almost two decades. EXHIB-IT! consistently has greater than \$1 million in revenue each quarter and has eight full-time staff and four contractors.

"We train them to be leaders, not employees," she said. "I can't do everything. I give my staff credit. They are always behind me."

Heckes is a national speaker and has written two books, *Full Brain Marketing* and *the Noise behind Business: How to Make Trade Shows Work*. Heckes, 58, has three grown children and eight grandchildren.

Lawyer Michelle Hernandez is a litigator and partner at Modrall Sperling in Albuquerque.

She says she's rarely experienced overt discrimination, except with opposing counsel and sometimes when she lobbied at the state Legislature on behalf of the Albuquerque Hispano Chamber.

"I've heard horror stories of how judges will treat you, but I've encountered very respectful judges. In court, there are so many women judges," she said. "You learn to read the room."

For example, she had a big trial while she was pregnant and had gestational diabetes. She explained to the judge she needed a break about every 20 minutes to check her blood glucose and adjust it, if necessary. The judge was very discreet in calling for breaks. "The judge and I were the only women in the room."

Still, bias and prejudice can be deep and unconscious.

"We have diversity, but we have disparity," she said. "We've come a long way (as women), but we aren't there yet."

Hernandez, 40, mother of two children, also believes in supporting other women and colleagues. She is the 2017-2018 chair of the Hispano Chamber of Commerce. She has served on the Hispanic National Bar Association and many other legal organizations in leadership capacities. She is the co-chair of her firm's diversity and inclusion committee.

Mary Martinez, CEO of Home Instead, a company that helps seniors to live independently at home, says she works to make sure paychecks at her company reflect experience and qualifications and not gender.

In New Mexico, women overall make about 83 cents compared to every dollar white men make and women of color make about 55 cents, according to a recent report from the National Women's Law Center.

"People should be paid commiserate with their skill level, not their gender," she said. Home Instead employs 157 people.

When she bought the company 17 years ago, after working for the previous owner for two years, she discovered she made \$10,000 less annually than her nearest

male counterpart. Martinez is a gerontologist and has experience in government and in other private companies.

Senior care is a woman-dominated field, so she was surprised at the discrepancy.

“I got it fixed and it remains that way,” she said.

Martinez, mother of three, is the incoming president of the board for the Hispano Chamber and serves the community in other capacities as well.

“I’ve been on the board at the Hispano Chamber for six years,” she said. “I use my influence to benefit young people in the direction of education.”

The chamber awards scholarships to deserving young people.

Martinez, who returned to college at New Mexico State University at the age of 24, says she worked hard to put herself through college.

“The scholarships enable and encourage them to pursue their passion. We encourage people to use and develop their creativity,” she said.

She’s proud to serve on the Hispano Chamber where members promote new businesses, find training and support. “The chamber is not a good-old boys network. We have every color of the rainbow. We are a very diverse board.”