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Ladies leading by example

BY SARAH TREFETHEN

Creative, confident and collaborative, women have made their mark on every aspect of New York's commercial real estate industry.

As the roster of speakers at the first annual *Real Estate Weekly* Women's Forum demonstrates, they run construction firms, control billions of dollars worth of property, and have sealed some of the biggest deals of the past decade — all in an industry that is still heavily dominated by the less-fair sex.

"I'm very proud to be a woman, proud to put a skirt on every day, proud to be very feminine," said Leslie Wohlman Himmel, managing partner of Himmel + Meringoff Properties and one of the city's top commercial landlords. "When you walk into a room, people don't forget your name, because there are so few women in the business."

The industry's top female talents are candid about the challenges they face, but they are also quick to point out advantages to being a woman in a male-dominated world.

"My business style and management strategy is always about being unique. And I don't know if it gets more unique than a woman running a construction company," said Michele Medaglia, president and CEO of ACC Construction, one of New York's premier women-owned construction management firms and mother of 9-year-old twins. But standing out as the only woman in a room isn't always an advantage. Industry veterans tell tales of discrimination that would challenge the thickest skin and the most robust sense of humor.

Pioneering broker Faith Hope Consolo, chairman of Prudential Douglas Elliman's retail sales and leasing division, has been matching merchants to storefronts for decades. She recalled attending a Real Estate Board meeting in her first months in the industry.

"No one wanted to talk to me," she said. Finally, one man approached her. "He said to me, 'What are you doing here? You're not wanted here.'"

Consolo stuck up for herself, and in the end she got the last laugh.

"That guy left the business about five years later," she said.

Even today, women say, they must go the extra mile to challenge expectations. "I think a woman, without being harsh and too aggressive, has to show that she knows more than people think," said Madelyn Wils, a former NYC Economic Development Commission vice-president who now controls five miles of Manhattan waterfront as president and CEO of the Hudson River Park Trust. "I like working with men, [but] I do think they have to know right up front that you know what you're talking about. You have to clearly draw the line around yourself to make sure they know that you're someone who can be in charge."

A taste for working together is another way some of the

industry's leading ladies say they have an advantage over their male competition.

"Women collaborate, and I think that collaboration equals innovation," said Forest City Ratner executive vice president MaryAnne Gilmartin, who oversees Forest City's commercial and residential development in New York.

Gilmartin recalled working with Mary Ann Tighe, the current chairman of the Real Estate Board of New York and president of the tri-state division of the mighty CBRE, to build the New York Times building on Eighth Avenue.

"We breathed the same air and lived in the same conference room for years," Gilmartin said. "I marvel to this day that we were able to collaborate so intensely."

Networking and mentorship are essential for any career in real estate, but many women make a point of reaching out to each other.

"I affirmatively try to network with other women, because I think we can help each other," said Elise Wagner, a partner in the land use division at Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP. "I think it's also true with other minorities — people want to help other people who are like them."

And support at home is just as important. Consolo chose not to have children, ("I think it gave me more freedom," she said) but praised each of her three ex-husbands as fellow business owners who supported and respected her career.

And for the women who did make the choice to become moms, time away from the kids is rewarded by a sense that they're serving as strong, independent role models for the next generation.

"I feel really lucky that I had kids, but I used to feel a little sad when I was young that I couldn't spend more time with them. Seeing that both my kids are aggressively pursuing careers makes me think that I set a good example," said Himmel, whose son and daughter are in the early 20s.

One final piece of advice commercial real estate's leading ladies have to offer their fellow women: don't beat yourself up if your accomplishments fall short of your highest expectations.

"Anyone who talks about balance is full of crap," Medaglia said. "Balancing your day consists of calming yourself down if you didn't get to everything. I did the most important things, my kids are okay, I'm okay, everything's okay."

Looking to the future, these talented dealmakers and city-shapers expect to see more young women joining them in the industry they love.

"You can't have it all," Gilmartin said, "but you can come pretty darn close."

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