

Blazing trails WFF sets table for leadership learning

Around 1,600 women, and men, gathered at the Gaylord in Dallas in March for the WFF's 20th annual conference.

Trailblazers see pathways when others only see trees. Not every attendee at the Women's Foodservice Forum's annual conference is a trailblazer, but if they didn't come away inspired to become one, they weren't paying attention.

The WFF has been setting the table for women leaders for the past 20 years. And while it's our families' responsibility to teach us table manners, WFF has taken on the role of teaching women the etiquette needed to be awarded the key to the executive washroom.

Julia Stewart, chair and CEO of DineEquity and one of the forum's original founders, was introduced by Dunkin' Donuts' Jon Luther as "a leader who has captured the dream you all aspire to."

Stewart said the association started "decades ago in a hotel room in Chicago.... We wanted to make a difference; to offer a hand, not a hand out...that random group of dreams became an organization of change."

And while the organization could rest on its 20 years of laurels, Stewart cautioned the group that its work had just begun, and that its legacy is still being developed.

"Your legacy isn't just what's written



Julia Stewart, left, is joined on stage by the past chairs of the Women's Foodservice Forum to toast the organization on its 20th year of helping women move up the foodservice ladder.

on your tombstone," Stewart told the audience. "It's created long before you're gone...it's how we behave, act, treat each other... the sum total of our actions."

And just as the WFF has a legacy to leave for the women who are just starting to climb the ladder, each woman in the audience also needs to think about what legacy they will leave behind.

Her advice was to start with small steps: Read something outside your comfort zone; get up an hour earlier than usual; seek out people who do things differently and learn from them. Never stop learning, she said.

Women also need to learn to get comfortable with risk-taking. "One reason we don't reach our potential is we're unwilling or afraid to take risks," Stewart said. "It's why we don't get promoted."

Stewart said she took a risk when she left her executive job in marketing to become an assistant manager at a Taco Bell restaurant. "People laughed at me,"

she said. "They didn't know I had a plan." Her plan was to learn operations so that she could run a large restaurant company.

Not everyone at the WFF meeting wants to run a restaurant, but most do want to become better leaders. There are several tracks to help attendees accomplish this—from emerging leaders to entrepreneurs.

A Sunday session for entrepreneurs opened with two keynoters, Dr. Simon Mak with the SMU Cox School of Business and Margaret Heffernan, an author and entrepreneur.

Mak gave the audience information on the common attributes of being an entrepreneur. Some of us, he said, are more suited to it than others, but for everyone who goes out on their own, three things have to align at the same time: the person, the concept and the capital. The person has to have risk tolerance. But at the same time, they have to have an idea that is right for the time and

the capital to sustain the business. Two out of the three just won't cut it.

Heffernen, who wrote the book "How She Does It: How Female Entrepreneurs are Changing the Rules for Business Success," focused on how to create and sustain a niche market, the building blocks of a successful business. Being innovative isn't about coming up with next big thing, like the Internet, she said. Innovation is about recognizing social change and providing a product or service that helps us navigate that change, or having "customer empathy"—recognizing when a customer needs something different.

And don't discount starting a business in a recession, she added. A recession provides opportunity, because companies are doing new things, and will consider working with someone unproven.

The afternoon closed with a panel of foodservice entrepreneurs who gave insight into the challenges of being out on your own, some of their success and why.

"Know what you're good at," multi-unit franchisee and human resources and training consultant Lyn Devorkin told the audience. "Really understand it and then leverage your talents." Kathleen Wood, a restaurant operations and executive consultant, added that it's good to be self aware. "Understand your weak-

nesses," she challenged the audience. "We all have fear right now, but have the courage to address those fears and get past them."

The business value of telling stories

Our brains crave categories, patterns and pictures, which is why supplying information in a personal story is an effective way to sell, according to author Lori Silverman, who gave a seminar on telling stories, not to be confused with story telling.

"What makes stories so powerful," she said. "The world is not created according to PowerPoint, the mind can't remember lists of information because it has no context." But tell a story, and your point will be remembered.

Maribeth Kuenzi, assistant professor at SMU Cox School of Business, gave tips to help move us all six degrees closer to Kevin Bacon—or the person who will buy our product or promote us.

- Don't just choose people who look like you (diversify your network).



Linda Pharr, WFF interim president, Good Morning America's Robin Roberts and Mary O'Broin, WFF's incoming chair.

- Don't be narrow minded. "Sometimes women won't share their networks with other women," Kuenzi said.
- Tell people why you chose them for your network and let them know how they can expect to benefit from being in your network.

Advice from keynoter Robin Roberts, co-anchor of ABC's "Good Morning America," encouraged women to "dream big and focus small." Tim Sanders, former leadership coach at Yahoo!, told attendees how important gratefulness, confidence and generosity are in a career.

At least for a career worth living. [FT](#)