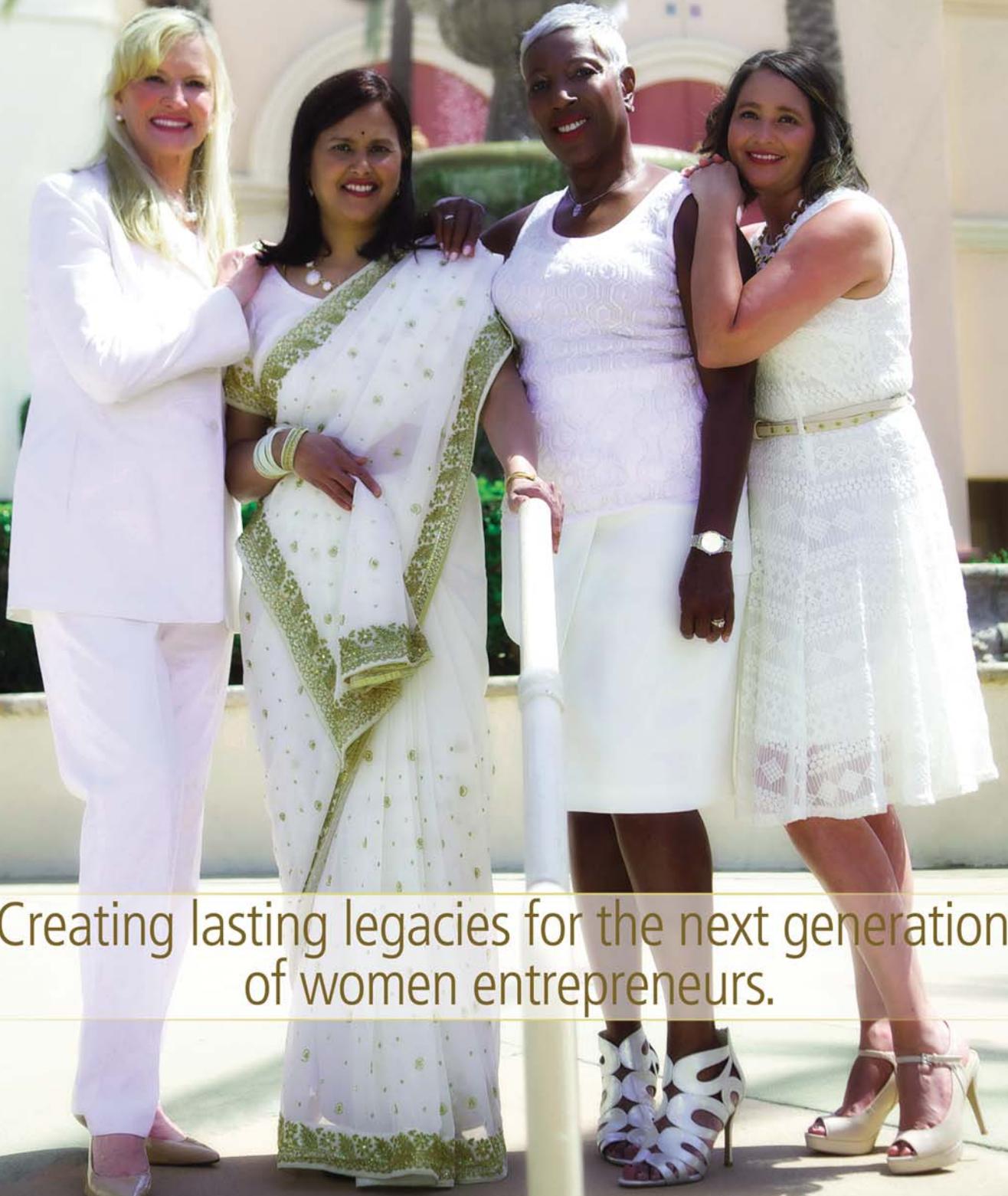


WBEs Who Rock!

By Tanya Isley



Creating lasting legacies for the next generation
of women entrepreneurs.

WBEs Who Rock! *(continued)*

Beginning in the 19th century, a “cult of domesticity” shaped American thought about women’s roles in the workforce. The notion was that women could best serve the country’s political and social needs by dedicating their energies to creating healthy households for their husbands and sons, and training their daughters to do the same.

A few defiant women owned their own businesses, though, often to furnish themselves with an income in the absence of a man to provide. Sometimes, women were thrust into traditionally male ventures after inheriting businesses from their fathers or husbands.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and women entrepreneurs have made tremendous strides by building their own legacies. According to an annual study of the state of woman-owned businesses from **American Express**, there were more than 8.6 million Woman Business Enterprises (WBEs) in the United States in 2013, which generated more than \$1.3 trillion in annual revenues and employed nearly 7.8 million people.

Armed with a variety of remarkable talents, **Christine Soward, Vasanthi Ilangovan, Patricia Watts, and Carol Nance** are among the ranks of women entrepreneurs who have risen to glory with their entrepreneurial skills.

“Expect the unexpected, and whenever possible, be the unexpected.” – Lynda Barry

Christine Soward inherited her business, **Dayton Mailing Services (DMS)**, from her father, **Robert Hale**, who founded the company in 1984. However, when Soward, then age three, and her family first came to the United States from the Philippines, the culture shock they experienced provided no clue to the success that lay ahead.

“We moved [to Ohio] in April, so we got to see snow, ride a plane, see electrical appliances, a flushing toilet—all within 24 hours,” she says.

Soward, the eldest of seven children of a Peace Corps pioneer and a Filipina mother, is president and owner of DMS, which specializes in printing and mailing services. Handling direct mail projects of all sizes from design to distribution, DMS employs its years of experience in building cost-effective solutions for clients.

Soward has been with DMS since it opened, working with her father and learning every facet of the business. “We were fortunate that we didn’t really need a sales staff. I kind of moved into that role,” she says. “[My dad] liked the production part of it, and not really the administrative part of it. Since I was very familiar with

the production side and I was personable, it was a very easy transition. I could talk layman’s terms with a client and still communicate to the shop.”



Eight years ago, Soward’s father decided it was time to retire, and initiated a buyout process for her to take ownership of the company; six years ago, she became sole owner. Since, she has grown DMS by double-digits and guided it into the digital age.

DMS started as a production shop, Soward says, just doing “the lick-’em and-stick-’em” on mailings—“nothing really sexy.” But expanding into data management provided a natural segue into digital printing and fulfillment to make the company a full-service provider.

Like most industries, mailing services, fulfillment, and printing took a tremendous hit during the Great Recession. There have been modest gains over the past few years, however, according to **Epicomm**, an association representing providers of printing, mailing, fulfillment, and marketing services. By early 2015, industrywide sales had grown 4.2 percent since 2011 to total just above \$80 billion, and 80-employee DMS outpaced the industry with significant growth every year, including a 30 percent rise in 2014 alone.

Soward expects the trend to continue. “This year, we’re working on some big contracts. Conservatively, we’re looking at 25 percent growth,” she says.

One of the many reasons behind DMS’s growth has been Soward’s leadership, and her willingness to consult with staff in order to embrace new technology. “My crew helps me focus on what we can sustain and trying to be in the forefront of technology. Also, we recognize that just because it’s older technology doesn’t mean it’s outdated. We embrace the old, look at ways to introduce it into the new, and marry them both.”

Soward has also added to DMS’ portfolio. Last year, the company acquired **Barrett Brothers Legal Publishing**, a WBE founded in 1860 that provides legal forms and related products to county, municipal, township, and village offices throughout Ohio. Additionally, she launched **The Bricks Agency** to create marketing programs from conception to implementation.

The company’s expansion into other ventures led to the implementation of an official name change. “Dayton Mailing Services really defines us in a way that’s not really who we are anymore,” Soward says. “We’re calling ourselves **DMS, Ink**. That kind of encompasses everything we do.”

Although her track record running the company founded by her father is stellar, she’s not the only family member involved in its success. Two of her sisters work for DMS, as well as two of her four sons. And her husband, a retired police officer, also works at DMS part-time, which Soward quips can mean 50 hours a week.

“The poor guy has a ‘honey-do’ list at home *and* at work,” she jokes.

Soward’s father’s influence still looms large, since she counts him as a key mentor in her life and career, and a guiding force in how she manages her business.

“I have to make sure that I’m continuing the legacy that he started. My dad always said, ‘I take the 80 people that work for me, and I’m supporting 80 families.’ I take that very seriously,” she says.

“I think the key is for women not to set any limits.” – Martina Navratilova

Like Soward, Vasanthi Ilangovan, CEO of **VIVA USA, Inc.** (VIVA), immigrated to the United States from another country and is the daughter of an entrepreneur. She grew up in India, where her family members operated businesses such as a leather company, import/export businesses, and farms. It was a very male-dominated environment. “My father is the head of the family and business. He is a philanthropist and is helping the com-

munity. He has four brothers, and they work together,” she says.

It was this early experience that spurred Ilangovan to start VIVA in the growing, male-dominated IT industry 19 years ago with her business partner, **Ilango Radhakrishnan**, who now serves as the company’s vice president. “I wanted to prove that I could have my own successful company and wanted to help our community,” she says.



Vasanthi Ilangovan

After receiving a work permit in the United States, Ilangovan’s initial entrepreneurial venture was an import/export business. However, because her husband was working elsewhere at the time and the couple had two young children, it was difficult to run alone. It was the late 1990s, and Ilangovan recognized that the IT industry held tremendous opportunities for entrepreneurs. Thus, VIVA was born.

“Lots of our friends helped me to start this business. I used networking events, workshops, [and] seminars to educate myself. When business picked up, I asked my husband to join me. Then, I hired another senior employee. We have grown from three to 500 employees now,” she says.

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VIVA specializes in staffing (IT and non-IT), software projects, and software as a service (SaaS)-based hosted solutions at six offices in the United States and India. Since its inception, the company has been named one of the Top 100 Asian-American Business by the U.S. PanAsian American Chamber of Commerce in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2013; one of the Top 100 IT suppliers for TAPFIN in 2012; and receiving *Diversity Business* magazine's Top Small Business Award in 2006. Most recently, the **Chicago Minority Supplier Development Council** named VIVA its 2014 Supplier of the Year, Class III.

The company has enjoyed tremendous success, and Ilangovan's commitment to customers and employees has allowed VIVA to be break through in a crowded industry. "We are good [at] finding talent, quality, and the right resources through our industry knowledge and experience," she says. "The people I work with and trust in every day help set my company apart from the rest of the competition. I have believed in hiring the right people and providing them the opportunities to perform their best, instilling the values of the company, and encouraging a collaborative environment."

Judging by the honors and recognition she and VIVA have received—including her induction into the Chicago Area Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame in 2011 by the **Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies of the University of Illinois at Chicago**—Ilangovan has found the right recipe for success. She left a restrictive, male-dominated business culture in India to distinguish her company in a predominantly male industry in the United States.

"There was not an equal place for woman in India," she says. "That made a big impact on me to achieve, and led me to today's path. The challenges I faced made me successful."

"If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it." – Margaret Fuller

Patricia Watts, president and CEO of **FCI Management Consultants**, was born and raised in Los Angeles, and a commitment to her community has been a driving force in life and business.

Everyone has a defining moment in their lives that spurs them to do something extraordinary. For Watts, the 1992 Los Angeles Riots was that moment. As a longtime employee of **Southern California Edison**, Watts was able to speak with executives soon after the riots to discuss the conditions that led to the uprisings and how the city could rebuild.

"What I said to them is that in our communities, there is a sense of hopelessness because there are no more blue-collar jobs. There isn't any job training, and so people don't really have a path or see a path to success. What needs to happen is that there needs to be more job creation," she says.

As a result, Edison donated a disused facility and opened a regional job-training center on a seven-acre



site in the city of Compton; Watts became project manager of the facility. The experience ultimately led to the creation of FCI, a full-service energy and water consulting company, in 1998.

"I've always felt very strongly about creating jobs for people in our community. One of the things that drove me as I started to build this company and grow it is to continue to be able to create jobs for people of color," she says.

FCI helps energy service providers plan and deliver programs that significantly reduce electrical demand within target markets, offering its expertise in efficiency services from system design to program development to marketing and installation.

"We're the liaison between the utility company and

its customers in the implementation of energy-efficiency technologies,” Watts says. “We actually go out and do energy audits. And then we go in and make recommendations for energy-efficient lighting, and for heating, ventilation, and air conditioning technologies that will improve the efficiency of those technologies.”

Watts recently extended her passion for job creation and community through a mentor-protégé training program that works to identify area individuals and gives them on-the-job training in energy audits, installations, and back-office support.

FCI was awarded a contract with Edison for an energy-efficiency program serving small businesses in 2006. Its training program has since graduated more than 60 people with marketable skills, and not only do her trainees get jobs in the field, FCI has hired some of them itself.

Like Soward and Ilangovan, Watts has also made the business a family affair, with her son, daughter and other family members holding positions with the company over the years. But she says that all of her 55 employees are family: “I am one of those employers who really believes that our employees are like family. I try to make them feel valued.”

“Never give up, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.” – Harriet Beecher Stowe

After several attempts at starting a viable business, Carol Nance and her husband, Bob, built one of the most successful carpet and rug businesses in the country with \$3,000, a dream, determination, and prayer.

One could say that the idea for the company fell off the back of a truck. “I was going to work one day, and I saw this truck from a major mill. It had all these scraps of carpet falling off [it.] [The driver] was going to the landfill with this beautiful stuff. I went back home and I took my children and I said, ‘I think I know what we can do. We can start out small and we can just see,’” she says. “I didn’t start out to be wealthy. I wanted my family to have a better life than I did.”

With the \$3,000 she had saved from the sale of her previous businesses, she rented an old building and bought a binder and a cutting knife.

“We went around to private mills to see if they would sell us their carpet scraps. Some of them did, but some of them gave them to us because it saved them money not taking it to the dump. They didn’t have any use for it,” Nance elaborates.

Since those humble beginnings in 1972, until today,

Nance Carpet & Rug, located in Calhoun, Georgia, has become a leading supplier of carpets, rugs, and related products to retailers such as **Walmart**, **Home Depot**, **Lowe’s**, and **Dollar General**. Over more than 40 years, Nance has built four manufacturing plants to estimated annual revenues of \$20 million, and now has more than 300 employees and countless satisfied buyers.



An engaging personality with a natural gift for storytelling, it’s easy to see why Nance was able to convince retailers to carry her product. But it’s more than just spinning an excellent yarn that allowed Nance Carpet & Rug to be successful for as long as it has.

“[Customers] know we have built a strong, strong legacy here, in that they know that we’re trustworthy and know they can depend on us. They know we have the best service and the best quality, and we’re not going to let them down. It’s just the way we think,” she says.

Nance’s desire for her family to have a better life than she did has become a reality. Many of second- and third-generation Nances are involved in the business, including her son, Mike, who is an executive officer at the company, and a granddaughter, Presley, who handles sales and marketing.

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For business owners searching for the key to industry longevity, Nance has advice that has guided her since the day she saw those carpet scraps fall off that truck: “Never give up. And always do what you say you’ll do. Keep the faith and give God the glory, and stay the course,” she says.

The United States has come a long way from the cult of domesticity. The descendants of the women who stayed home to

tend to the needs of men have become powerful entrepreneurs and business leaders in new and emerging industries. Christine Soward, Vasanthi Ilangovan, Pat Watts, and Carol Nance have proven their mettle, and it’s clear they won’t let their business roles be defined by gender.



“I don’t want [people] to say FCI is just an MBE or a WBE,” Watts says. “But know that we are one of the more successful companies in the energy industry.” ♦

Tanya Isley is an award-winning journalist with more than 20 years’ experience in traditional and on-line news media. She has managed news media content strategy for more than 50 websites, and her experience

has included stints at The Manna Network, Cox Communications, Cygnus Business Media, and WTVD-TV in Raleigh-Durham, N.C. Isley has undergraduate degrees in journalism and history from North Carolina Central University and a graduate degree in interactive journalism from American University.

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