



Daughters of Prominent Local Business Leaders Take Center Stage

BCW and People's United Bank Leadership Conversation Series celebrates a new generation of hard-working women executives who are following in the steps of their fathers.

By Paul Adler

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Left to right: Joseph Simone, President, Simone Development Corporation; Patricia Simone, President, Simone Management Group; Joanna Simone, Vice President, Leasing & Property Management Operations; Joseph Armentano, CEO & Chairman of the Board Paraco Gas Corp.; Christina Armentano, Executive Vice President of Sales & Business Development; Anthony Justic, Business Council of Westchester, Board Chairman; Joseph McCoy, Region Manager, Senior Vice President, People's United Bank; Moderator Elizabeth Bracken-Thompson, Partner, Thompson & Bender; Marsha Gordon, President and CEO Business Council of Westchester; Christie L. Houlihan, Senior Director and Council, Houlihan-Parnes Realtors; James Houlihan, Managing Partner, Houlihan-Parnes Realtors; Alexandra Weisz, Vice President of Operations, RPW Group; Robert Weisz, CEO, RPW Group.

Photo by John Vecchiolla

High atop the Ritz Carlton Westchester in White Plains earlier this week, women who work alongside their fathers demonstrated that they are much more than high-powered executives — they are the future of their respective firms. On May 14, BCW's People's United Bank Leadership Conversation series brought several local business heads and their daughters to Kanopi to discuss the ins and outs of keeping a company in the family, as well as the pros and cons of working with a close relative.

The conversation — which was moderated by Liz Bracken-Thompson of Thompson and Bender — featured Joseph Simone, President of Simone Development Companies and his daughters, VP of Leasing & Property Management Operations Joanna and President of Simone Management Group Patricia; Joseph Armentano, CEO of Paraco Gas Corp and his daughter, Executive VP of Sales and Business Development Christina Armentano; Robert Weisz, CEO of RPW Group, and his daughter, VP of Operations Alexandra Weisz; as well as Houlihan-Parnes Realtors' Managing Partner James Houlihan and his daughter, Senior Director and Counsel Christina L. Houlihan.

According to BCW President and CEO Marsha Gordon, the event is a watershed moment. “Over the years we have had Westchester's corporate leaders and healthcare leaders [speak at this conference], but today is a very unusual program because we have leaders of major family businesses whose daughters have become part of the business in a very integral way,” Gordon tells *914INC*. “In this year of the woman, we love to see this younger generation of women become leaders in their family businesses, which have been mainstays of Westchester for many years.”

For Paraco Gas VP Christina Armentano, self-assurance is key for succeeding in any organization. “It's not only what skills can I bring, but there's also a level of self confidence I think you need to have when you join a family business,” she says. “You must truly feel you are the best fit for this opportunity at the time and know that you are going to face challenges and stumble along the way. But it is really important for anyone joining a family business to build and develop that confidence. ... Every single day I am at the organization, I feel it is really important to look at the path that brought us here today but then think about how I am going to put my stamp on the organization.”

Meanwhile, RPW Group CEO Robert Weisz offered a more touching view of his experiences working alongside his daughter, Alexandra. “I must admit it has been one of the most rewarding if not the most rewarding experience I have ever had, because, by working together, we got to know each other and I learned to respect her from a completely different point of view — as a professional,” says Weisz. “I have seen all her accomplishments and I admit that some of the biggest changes I have made in my life were a result of our relationship. Sometimes parents and children have differences but the way to solve them is to spend more time together, not less time.”

Weisz also shared some candid remarks about the workplace inequality that hiring his daughter revealed. “If you asked me two years ago if there is a difference between men and women in business, I would have said there is absolutely no difference whatsoever,” remarks Weisz. “But Alexandra's coming to the business has made me realize that world is very different for women,

and that women are not treated the same [as men]. We have meetings where people assume because she is a woman she is not one of the top executives. By the end of the meeting people realize she is running the show...but it is pretty much on every level, that somehow we assume women are not in a leadership role.”

Another setback for the daughters can be the misconception that they were simply handed their current roles — a fact that Christina Armentano is deeply aware of. “I truly believe that when you are in a family business you can’t feel like it is a right of passage and you have to say, ‘I am earning my keep every single day,’” says Armentano. “You have to have that work ethic where you are the first one there in the morning and the last one to leave.”

Alexandra Weisz seconds this. “We all play to our strengths but it’s all a team effort, if someone has to cover the phones I will answer the phones, and there is nothing below me or above me,” she says. “It is a team mentality and we are all there for each other.”

And according to Joanna Simone, this teamwork can have some major positives. “You, as a younger generation, are really watching the person that is leading you and, in my position, I am really trying to soak up everything [my father] is doing,” she says.

Her father Joseph agrees that there are positives and negatives to the working arrangement. “The pros are that we can pass down very important information from generation to generation that we might not do with employees, but would with your daughters — give them the recipe to the secret sauce,” says Simone. “They have a vested interest in the business, they have a lot of emotion, and we know we will always be together and have trust...but that same emotion works both ways and unfortunately they have the stigma of nepotism that they have to deal with and work with. And, sometimes, there can be hurt feelings in the workplace.”

Despite any drawbacks, each daughter deeply values their places within their respective organizations. “We as daughters have the unique opportunity to give that kind of feedback you wouldn’t necessarily get from an employee who doesn’t feel they have the right or ability to speak their mind about a particular decision,” notes Alexandra. And according to Christie Houlihan, the experience is, above all, a tremendous benefit. “We may disagree,” says Christie. “But I think when we are working together, our relationship is at its best and I couldn’t be happier. I am very thankful for the opportunity.”