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Guest essay: Looking back at women's progress in Rochester over past decades

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Written by BJ Mann

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The working world of the early '70s was a time when downtown restaurants had men-only sections, pay equity was optional and gender dictated your career advancement. It was in that era that I began working at Rochester Telephone and was the first woman hired as an analyst, in a management role.

I quickly discovered that being connected to career-minded women, sharing the experiences and challenges of climbing the corporate ladder was essential. As our networking successes grew, we realized it could become powerful if from casual meetings, the concept emerged to band together in a more formal manner that could create a commitment to networking while promoting career advancement and mentoring for women in the workplace.

In the process, leaders emerged and events were planned to test an idea; the response was overwhelming. Within a year, 15 women launched the Rochester Women's Network (RWN). Our goal: provide peer support, share knowledge and advance career strategies for working women. Within two years the Network boasted 700 interested women, and I had the privilege of being the first president of the organization. Like all fledgling organizations, there were growing pains, along with a consistent vision that the RWN world be a unique and valuable resource providing professional development, networking and support for working women.

Coincidentally, during my presidency, I was also pregnant with my first child, so it has been easy for me to keep track of the RWN's infancy, childhood, young adulthood and now maturity ... 34 years old.

While over the years I have made some sacrifices in my work life to accommodate my three children, I never stepped away from my role as a professional working mom, nor my commitment to the

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advancement of women in the workforce.

My "phone company" career spanned 30 years, after which I retired to found my own business as a divorce and family mediator.

To my delight, I discovered the Network served me in a new way as an entrepreneur, providing many forums for meeting new business contacts and sharing my growing business with others. I attended programs and workshops that inspired me to persevere and learn valuable strategies for building my business.

March is National Women's History Month and RWN is both history and contemporary. RWN was founded because women understand that networking is an essential ingredient to success. Networking offers the opportunity to meet many people, many of whom are a potential client, customer, future boss or friend. In addition to the professional support and career success that I credit to RWN, the richest benefit by far are the dear and close friends I have made and sustained.

Mann retired from Global Crossing after 30 years. She is one of the founders and the first president of the RWN.

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