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Women Leading Family Businesses - Marin Magazine

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When Hali Croner, CEO of [The Croner Company](#) in Kentfield, took over the business from her father and his business partner in 1999, her father gave her the greatest gift of all: he let her run the show.

Mel Croner started the company in 1978 as a boutique compensation and benefits consulting firm and soon took on a business partner, Pete Culver. In 1989, Croner's oldest daughter, Hali, joined the firm. At the time, the company was conducting surveys on how much people earned in various fields, but Hali was its first employee to look at compensation in the emerging world of video game production. Since she's taken charge, the company's 20-or-so employees have continued to branch out and now produce nine annual industry-specific surveys, monitoring pay packages for workers in everything from animation to digital content to biotech.

Pete and Mel, now in their 70s and 80s, drop by the office in between tennis and golf games. But there's no question who's

boss. “My father has been a model of how to step back when it’s time for someone else to come forward,” Hali says. “He and Pete were willing to step back because they were at the point in their careers where they didn’t need to work as much and they saw me thriving and wanted to support me.”



HALI CRONER

It’s a growing pattern: the Smith and Sons of the world are becoming Smith and Daughters. [A recent study by EY](#) (formerly Ernst & Young) of the world’s 589 largest family businesses showed that increasingly, women are becoming their leaders. In the workplace overall, 13.8 percent of business’s top management teams are composed of women, but in family-owned businesses that jumps to 22 percent. What’s more, 60 percent of surveyed family companies were considering choosing a woman as their next CEO.

That’s big news, because family businesses are the backbone of the global economy, creating an estimated 70 to 90 percent of

the worldwide gross domestic product (GDP) and 50 to 80 percent of jobs in most countries, EY has found.

Why are families more receptive to female execs? “There are a lot of variables, but long-term thinking is definitely one of them,” says [EY Americas Family Business Leader Carrie Hall](#). “Family businesses tend to think more long-term and when people [women who have more time to prove themselves] can perform in their roles over a longer period of time, it helps erase biases.”

For many women, joining the family business was a practical move — not necessarily one they’d planned on. Take [Stephanie Kirby Plante](#), president and CEO of CPI Developers, which owns San Rafael’s Shoreline Center as well as the Tesla Supercharger station in Kettleman City, California. Plante’s grandfather, Martin Bramante, started the business in 1967, when he purchased a landfill known as San Quentin Disposal. While Plante was growing up, her mother, Susan Bramante Kirby, helped with his bookkeeping. The family decided to develop the San Rafael site in 1987.



STEPHANIE PLANTE

Plante loved television and, after graduating from [UC Berkeley](#), became a traffic reporter for KRON 4 and then a producer. When her mother was diagnosed with cancer in 1999, she quit her job to help care for her. Her mom died soon afterward, and Plante thought about returning to television. But her grandfather urged her to stay put. “You’re going to have to handle your mother’s affairs,” Plante says he told her. “Oh, and by the way,” he also said. “I don’t know how to turn the computer on. Do you think you could come in and help me for a while?”

Twenty years later, she’s still at CPi. In 2015, a year after her grandfather died, she bought out several relatives and is now the company’s sole proprietor. But her family’s legacy is a point of pride. “It’s important to me to celebrate our tenure here,” she says. “Being in business for more than 50 years is a tremendous feat and I’m grateful for those roots and that foundation, which taught me never to expect anything and to work hard for what you want, and then to make space and time to give back.”

Being part of the family does not shield women from challenges, especially in male-dominated industries. Patty Garbarino, president of Marin Sanitary Service, knows this well. A few weeks into that role, she was sitting at a conference table with her father, Joe, who co-founded the company in 1948. They were waiting for a union representative; when he arrived he took one look at Patty and said, “Um-huh. No way. I don’t negotiate in no room with a woman.”

“Well, OK,” Joe replied. “But you’re going to have a hard time following this meeting from a parking lot.”



PATTY GARBARINO

The union negotiator relented and joined the conversation. Since then, Garbarino has negotiated with the Teamsters countless times in the 19 years she’s been boss, and it’s among the accomplishments she’s proudest of. She also oversees 255 employees and was elected president of the [California Refuse Recycling Council](#) in 2000 — as the first woman ever to hold the position.

Garbarino is one of four daughters; there were no sons to inherit the business. That also was the case for Andrea Schultz, president of Greenbrae Management, which manages the [Bon Air Shopping Center](#) and several apartment buildings. She is the youngest of four girls. Her grandfather, Niels Schultz, was a Danish immigrant who purchased more than 600 acres of ranchland from the Catholic Archdiocese in 1946. The swath of

land originally stretched from Highway 101 to Manor Road in Kentfield. In addition to building homes and apartment buildings, Niels and his son (also named Niels) opened the Bon Air Shopping Center in 1952.



ANDREA SCHULTZ

The younger Niels — Andrea’s father — was running the company when she joined in 1990. Her youngest child had started kindergarten and she wanted something to do. Over time, she assumed more and more responsibilities and was named president in 2006, two years before her father’s death. Since then she’s had to confront a challenging retail environment and has overseen the “refresh” of the shopping center, transforming it into a community gathering place with fire pits, a bocce court and plenty of places to sit. She also oversees about 35 employees.

As part of the refresh, Schultz and her team decided to redo their signage to reflect their heritage: “We have so much history here and I thought we should capture that,” she says. “I wanted to go

forth with a more modern look, but I also wanted it to be about my father and grandfather too. So now our signs say ‘BON AIR GREENBRAE Since 1952.’ ”

Because of those deep community roots, Schultz is a strong believer in giving back — a common trait among family business leaders, EY’s Carrie Hall says. Schultz sits on the operating board and executive committee of [Marin General Hospital](#) and was chair of MGH’s Foundation Board. Hali Croner served as president of the board of directors of Congregation Rodef Sholom in San Rafael. Stephanie Plante has been a member of the board of the [San Rafael Chamber of Commerce](#) for seven years.

Being part of a support network is important for these women as well. Schultz and Croner are members of Vistage, a peer mentoring organization for CEOs and business owners nationwide. Plante often reaches out to other members of the East San Rafael Working Group, which she started.

For Maggie McDonogh, support is closer to home. She’s owner/operator of the Angel Island–Tiburon Ferry, which her father, Milton, founded in 1959. McDonogh considers herself a fourth-generation business owner because her great-grandfather “ran boats” around the bay starting around the mid-1800s, and her grandfather operated the launch between the north and south towers of the Golden Gate Bridge while it was being built. She took over the company a few years before her father’s death in 2008.



MAGGIE MCDONOGH

“The most challenging part about this job has also been the biggest blessing, which is I was able to rear my children while I worked on the boat,” McDonogh says. “My dad always helped out. My mom would help out. But I was the mom who had the baby in a little sack while I was running the boat.”

By bringing her kids literally on board all the time, she’s also been able to line up her successors — a concern that often looms for family businesses. “It was wonderful to work with my father and have him as my best friend, mentor and business partner,” she says, “and now I get to work with my son, Sam, who’s my new business partner. I get to teach him and watch him develop and excel past what I’ve taught him. And my daughter, Becky, is deckhanding. So I’m lucky. My children want to do the same thing.”

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