

The Chicago Network

An invitation-only, prestigious organization of the most successful Chicago-area women in the corporate, academic, non-profit and entrepreneurial sectors celebrates its 30th anniversary. *By Lisa Skolnik*

This past March, when President Obama created a White House Council on Women and Girls, he appointed Valerie Jarrett, senior advisor to the president, and Tina Tchen, director of the White House Office of Public Liaison, co-chairs of the new group. Both are members of The Chicago Network (TCN). So are two other Chicago women who figure prominently in Obama's administration – White House Social Secretary Desiree Rogers and Associate Counsel to the President Susan Sher.

When they decamped to D.C. this past fall, the quartet left behind the likes of Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, Sara Lee Corp. CEO Brenda Barnes, Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association President Deborah Rutter, Deloitte & Touche Regional Managing Partner Deborah Dehaas, Ariel Investments President Mellody Hobson, "starchitect" Jeanne Gang and more to hold down TCN's proverbial fort. (In the interest of full disclosure, Today's Chicago Woman President/Founder Sherren Leigh is also a member.)

But for all its star-power, the group does not enjoy instant name recognition with all Chicagoans. For those who aren't in the know, it's an invitation-only professional organization for women, similar to those once all-male clubs with heady names that bring business or society to mind. Think The Eco-

nomics Club of Chicago, The Chicago Club and Union League Club of Chicago. But TCN was started in 1979, when these now coed clubs didn't allow women in their ranks.

Back then, the old-boys networks reigned supreme in business, government, politics, science, healthcare, academia and even the arts. There was nowhere women could forge those buddy-buddy bonds that men accrued playing golf, serving on boards and belonging to clubs, which allowed them to be first in-the-know, get insider perspectives, share contacts and cut sealed-with-a-handshake deals.

Sheli Rosenberg recalls the frustration of those days. "In 1974, I was president of Chicago Council of Lawyers," she says. "The heads of all the local legal organizations would have monthly lunch meetings so we could keep each other informed, but I couldn't go to some of them. I got thrown off the fourth floor of The Standard Club and had to sneak in the side entrance of the Union League Club," she recollects with an incredulous timbre in her tone, 35 years later. Today, she's retired as the CEO of Equity Group Investments; back then, she was a partner at Schiff, Hardin & Waite, and young, feisty and irked. "I almost never saw another woman where I worked."



A SNAPSHOT OF TCN'S MEMBERSHIP...

TOP ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT)
HEATHER BECKER, CEO, THE CHICAGO CONSERVATION CENTER; ADELA CEPEDA, PRESIDENT, A.C. ADVISORY, INC.; ERIN MCINERNEY, FORMER EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, LASALLE BANK CORPORATION, TCN 2008 COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE CHAIR AND TCN 2008 WOMEN ON BOARDS COMMITTEE; CHERYL A. FRANCIS, CO-FOUNDER AND CO-CHAIRMAN, CORPORATE LEADERSHIP CENTER



BOTTOM ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT)
AMY OSLER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE CHICAGO NETWORK; CHRISTINE EDWARDS, PARTNER, WINSTON & STRAWN, LLP; THERESE FAUERBACH, CEO AND FOUNDING PRINCIPAL, THE NORTHRIDGE GROUP, INC.; PATTI BOBB, PRESIDENT, PATRICIA C. BOBB & ASSOCIATES AND OF COUNSEL, PROPES & KAVENY

No wonder Sheli and a few of her friends started meeting regularly. Chicago Tribune Features Editor Cokie Dishon gave the group a cause. "We were going to found a magazine dedicated to women's issues," explains Sheli. The magazine never got anywhere, but the meetings did. "It was pretty lonely out there, and we all enjoyed being together so much that we decided to do something about it."

Within a year, this core group of nine women organized The Chicago Network, which met officially for the first time on June 18, 1979 in The Metropolitan Club, with about 75 prominent women in attendance. Chicago had just elected its first female mayor, Jane Byrne, and Hanna Gray had become the first woman to head a major American university when she became president of the University of Chicago a year earlier.

The women at that first meeting were inspired by these successes and had an ambitious premise: to forge relationships that would help them advance their own careers and each other; in other words, form a "girls" network that offered the same benefits as the old boys clubs of their male peers.

Thirty years later, they've proved to be model citizens, doing all that and more. In 1998, they were one of the first groups of their ilk (11 other cities have similar networks; Chicago's was among the first) to undertake a census to measure women's representation in key leadership positions in Chicago companies. In 2004, they also helped found a national organization that unites all 12 major professional women's organizations across the nation, the InterOrganization Network (ION), which pools resources, knowledge and statistics.

But most saliently, they publicize their annual census, drawing major media attention to their yearly findings. And despite their efforts to promote women in leadership, boardroom and high-earning positions, the news isn't always good. Their latest figures of women executives at the area's 50 largest companies, released in December 2008, show that not much has changed at the top. Despite some hard-fought gains (the number of female board members at these companies reached their highest level at 15 percent last year), nearly 30 percent still have no female board members and more than two-thirds have no women among their top earners.

Not only do these findings shed an embarrassing light on companies that have done little to advance women, they substantiate TCN's purpose and growth. "We originally thought we'd cap our membership at 200, but found the reality is, you can't put a cap on the number of women in top spots. It's growing, shifting and changing all the time," says Amy Osler, TCN's executive director.

Today, the group has almost 400 members from every walk of professional life. That means women who run major corporations mingle with those who head non-profits, entrepreneurial start-ups and even perform in the arts, such as Yuan-Qing Yu, Chicago Symphony Orchestra violinist and assistant concertmaster.

"We look for women who have made remarkable contributions, and cover every area we can find to include," explains Amy. "Those invited to join have achieved a certain professional status in their field, and are also actively involved in the community. All this makes the Network a very select group, and membership carries the cachet that you have arrived."

"When I was starting my business, I kept hearing about TCN from everyone I called on, and I really wanted to be in it. It was almost like this secret society," says Nicole Loftus, 38, CEO of Zorch International. Nicole, who founded her business in 2002 to provide companies with branded merchandise, is one of the few who didn't have to wait very long. When she landed in Inc. Magazine in 2007 as the 27th fastest growing company in the nation, she reached out to Christie Hefner. "She's always been one of my favorite women to watch, so I wrote a note to thank her for being such an inspiration. But I never expected to hear back from her," she confides. A few weeks later, Christie not only emailed her back, she nominated her for membership.

During the year Nicole has been in the group, she's reaped some of

the prime advantages it offers. One is the opportunity to meet entrepreneurial women she's long admired, such as United Scrap Metal founder and CEO Marsha Serlin, and receive their counsel. Nicole's company now holds two Inc. Magazine national rankings for 2008: eighth fastest growing company and number-one woman-led company.

For others, the advice comes in the form of discussion at network dialogs and roundtables the group holds frequently throughout the year. "It's very interesting and helpful to sit around a table of women and hear how they're dealing with outreach to their clients, introducing new products, getting loans or even collection," observes Eva Maddox, principal in the commercial architecture and design firm Perkins+Will and current board chair of the Network. "We gain knowledge and support from each other's experiences."

Then there's the sheer power of knowledge about the world outside your own the Network provides. Donni Case, a strategic consultant who formerly headed the Financial Relations Board and recently founded Kennicott Partners, joined the group in 2001. Her experience since then has been telling. "My focus had always been corporate and financial, but this has expanded my universe," she says. "I've learned about other fields, and been exposed to so many high-achieving women. It's been educational and profound."

And in trying times, the group has learned to stretch. When the economy tanked this past winter, the organization got downright enterprising to help its troubled members. With skills and creativity to share, "We quickly planned a Small Business and Entrepreneur Round Table, which took place in mid-January," explains Donni, who headed the effort with TCN program chair Patti Bobb, an attorney who heads a namesake firm.

Commiserating with each other in these forums was not an option. "These times challenge your nerves, but they also create opportunity," says Donni. "You have to look beyond the crisis." The program proved so successful, she and Patti organized a second one two weeks later for non-profits, and published a meaty abstract following both programs summarizing strategies and options. It was circulated to the entire membership. "They took the idea, turned it around on a dime and made it meaningful for all of us," says Eva.

Aside from the mentoring and business-building exchanges, membership in the Network also has perks and privileges. Men have long known that all the information you need to get things done – in both your professional and personal life – won't always be in the public domain. "Your network is sometimes the best way to get information on several levels," says Terri McNally, CEO of the financing and leasing company Global Capital.

Terri, a mother of four and a highly successful entrepreneur, substantiates this tactic every day. When asked about her relationship to TCN, she raves, "It's the greatest group. Yesterday I had a call from someone in the Network who's very powerful and interested in a meeting I'm hosting for Women Impacting Public Policy. She's involved in the Global Summit of Women, and wants to do something on policy issues and reform, too. We can work together, and probably wouldn't know each other without the Network."

Yet with her next breath, Terri shows how TCN can make an important and meaningful difference on another level for its members. "It's also like having this network to help you with your daily life," she says. "If you have a great assistant you need to let go but want to find her a job, or want to sell your house, you can send out an email to other members," she explains, adding, "I'd love my daughter to be in the Network some day."

So as The Chicago Network turns 30, its members network away on every level and more. But here's the secret to success for these relationships: "The only rule we have is you return each other's calls within 24 hours," Terri says. Everyone complies, and thus hurt feelings are eliminated from the start.

Two things are obvious. The need for this group is stronger than ever, and it's time to break out the pearls. After all, that's what 30th anniversaries are for. ■