

Women in Business
LEADERS ■ INNOVATORS ■ VISIONARIES
CONSTRUCTION



BY GARY QUACKENBUSH
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Linda Novy is first and foremost and outdoor person who has always loved nature, animals and people. She turned her avocation into a profitable enterprise called the Gardeners' Guild, Inc. (GGI) now celebrating more than 30 years of continuing service to the seven counties that comprise the Bay Area.

"I began my professional gardening career in 1974 as a 'one truck' gardener receiving my training in landscaping in the 'hands-on' school of horticulture after attending Colorado State University," Linda says.

GGI was formed in 1972 and Linda joined the organization in 1975 as an estimator and gardener. She purchased the company from Adam Blackwelder and Alan Weiss in the mid seventies and set out to make a difference in the way landscaping is performed. "I don't necessarily want GGI to be the biggest exterior and interior landscaping and grounds management firm in the west, just the best," she says.

The company began with six people and is now an enterprise of 120



employees plus additional seasonal workers. Her greatest opportunities have been in creating a Sustainable Landscape Management program to offer commercial and residential clients, and in forming an employee ownership culture. She has a deep interest in sustainable landscaping management that emphasizes conservation, recycling and the reuse of resources as well as the restoration of habitat and ecosystems.

She built GGI into a one-stop, single source for commercial and residential clients looking for landscape management, interior and exterior maintenance and construction

services. Her vision for the company is to enhance it's standing as the premier landscape management contracting firm in Northern California. To get there, Linda and her team use a systems approach to preserving the environment with a careful analysis of the site, the irrigation system, and the local ecology before work begins.

"My challenge today is working with my executive team in transitioning GGI into a 100% employee-owned business culture," Linda says. This idea began in 1998 when she started to think about an exit strategy. Linda met with GGI's management team and the board of directors. She put her ideas about the concept of employee ownership on the table and stepped back to get their responses. Acceptance of her proposal was over-

Linda J. Novy

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Revenue: (2003 \$8.5 million projected)

Employees: 120

Key to Success: Have a vision that you feel passionate about, and strategically communicate this vision with your team. It is equally important to know when the vision should be changed and to always remain open to fresh ideas and how you are feeling.

whelming and today GGI is making a smooth transition to collective ownership.

According to Linda, "This is no small task and one that involves a number of emotional and day to day changes. I plan to stay on as a member of the board and continue to work with GGI to help it move into a new era. I enjoy seeing our clients' properties improve over time, and find the growth of our staff as rewarding as seeing our landscapes grow!"

"The outlook for our industry will include a lot of mergers and consolidations, but companies with the strongest client relationships, good reputations and systems will prosper. While the commercial component of the landscape construction market is reflecting current economic conditions, the residential market is doing fine. There will always be new regulations, techniques and improved practices to consider, but if you stay ahead of these issues you will be successful," Linda says.

Linda puts her love of gardening to work in her own large vegetable garden and orchard. When she's not working with plants, she enjoys riding her horse, Spyder. "The barn is a great place to get away because there's no one out there to talk about work. It's just you, your horse and the great community of women at the barn." Linda is also part of a hiking group comprised of long time friends that explore new Marin trails each month. Her cattle dog, Tucker, is with her on most expeditions.

Her personal goal right now centers on having a smooth transition of ownership and leadership, and looking forward to having more free time. "When you work 60 hours a week for so many years, you often have to put aside certain areas of yourself to serve the business and community. I am beginning to focus on rounding out some of these areas, and want time to hang out in my garden and with friends," she says.

To gain inspiration for the major changes in her life, she participated in a sweat lodge at Slide Ranch, an educational farm community on the coast, and found the experience both refreshing and enlightening.

About 18 years ago, Linda took a class from Maureen Hochler, a person who was to change her life and who would later become a business consultant and a member of GGI's board.

"Maureen's class was about solving conflicts within organizations and her insights made a big impression," Linda says. "She is an incredible mentor who has helped me with my personal growth as well as with my management skills. I consider her to be both a friend and a close advisor. She always encouraged me to listen, take notes and not to react emotionally. I know I have her to thank for helping me evolve from a single operator to an organizational leader."

The most recent addition to Linda's bookshelf is "Gaia's Garden," a biographical work that deals with issues related to permaculture. She also enjoys poetry by Rumi. But the one person she has always wanted to meet was Georgia O'Keefe. "What a remarkable woman with such a highly developed sense of curiosity. At age 70 she was still taking risks, flying in an airplane for the first time to visit a museum in England!"

Linda's leadership skills are also deployed with a number of social, civic and environmental groups. She has had the privilege of serving on several committees and boards including being a former member of the Advisory Board at California Polytechnic University, Board Member of the Marin Horse Council, Environmental Representative to the Marin Economic Commission, Board Member of the Marin Conservation League, and member of the MMWD Citizen's Advisory Committee.

Linda currently serves on the Marin County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Commission, "Go Marin," a non-profit group working to bring forward a local transportation initiative, and MCSTPP's Citizen's Advisory Committee. Linda received the Bay Area NAWBO (National Association of Women Business Owners) award for "Trailblazer of the Year" in 1998 and the national award from NAWBO and Wells Fargo Bank for the "National Women Business Owner" award in 2002.

Her advice for women in business is to "first surround yourself with the best people possible. Then, use your skills as a woman and don't be afraid to run the business as a woman. Always trust in your intuition and follow the path that has heart," Linda says. •