

Reinventing



Sonoma County Connections' forums for women in business involve presentations and networking. (Duncan Garrett Photography)

the Village



**Women's
support groups
enrich North
Bay business.**

By Bonnie Durrance

Picture yourself in the Fiji Islands, a communal village culture where, since ancient times, childcare, domestic chores and women's wisdom have been shared as part of village life. In such an environment, 20 years ago, Kathleen Hoare, now a loan consultant in Santa Rosa, managed with ease to work all hours running her own restaurant while raising her baby. She was a single mother, but in the island culture, she was not alone. When her child was three, however, and it was time to return home to the United States, she found life as a single mother without immediate extended family close by was to be quite another story. "In a communal culture, there's lots of help. But in America, you're expected to do it all on your own."



This sense of being on your own is one prime reason women in business find themselves gravitating to the kind of support that's been a part of the male professional culture so long, it's not even thought of as "support." Places where men can go to meet peers, get to know others and learn the culture of their organizations—the golf course, squash court or private back rooms—aren't historically that welcoming to women. So women are creating places of their own to network and to feel they belong to something, especially if they work as independents. Not just "The Club," but a genuine community of women who share similar values and challenges.

Making connections

When she came home to Santa Rosa and decided she needed reeducation to prepare for a career that would let her take care of her child independently, Hoare applied for and received reeducation scholarships from Connections, a Santa Rosa-based nonprofit, dedicated to the advancement of women in business through service and education, that's about to celebrate its 20th year. After she graduated from Santa Rosa Junior College and Sonoma State University and started her home loan business, she became an active member of the group—and she

says it's made all the difference.

"As a woman in business, joining Connections was a really good move," she says. "Being in a one-person business can be very isolating, and to have the business support of women for community, education and development is really a blessing." She

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—Kathleen Hoare, Connections

explains that even though the scholarship wasn't a lot of money—just enough to pay for books—the more important thing was the scholarship signified affirmation. "It let me know there's a community of supportive women out there and reminded me that what I'm doing has a lot of value. I felt connected."

How women's networking works

"I think women, in general, crave community and tend to be more community-oriented," says Connections board member Diana Morgan. Women are more willing to admit that they need support and to be supportive of each other."

Connections is one of a number of support groups in the North Bay that provide that sense of community. Each has a different emphasis and format, but all share the idea that women advance better individually as they advance together. In that, Connections is a model.

"Our primary focus is raising money for scholarships and helping women's organizations," says Morgan. "In turn, we all get to know each other and do a lot of business networking." At their regular meetings, Connections hosts educational speakers and also collects gifts and services and raffles them off to raise money for scholarships and other women's organizations, such as the Sloan House Emergency Women's Shelter. "We laugh a lot," she adds. "It's not stuffy. It's very human, fun and authentic. People can come as a guest for as long as they want and not have to join, which I also like. We really go out of our way to make people who are new to the group feel comfortable."

For the "magic" to really work, though, you have to be involved. "I tell people when they come for the first time that it's a group where you want to really make a commitment," she says. The organization is for you, "if you're looking for a group of amazing, supportive, empowered women who are mostly entrepreneurs; if you're looking for business support and friendship; and if you're looking to give back to women through an amazing organization."

WINN Meet-ups in Napa

For professional and social networking on a regular (and spontaneous) basis, Women in Napa Networking (WINN) is the ideal format. Pamela Snyder founded the group two years ago, after moving to Napa from San Francisco, as a way to offset the isolation of running her business (including 33 team members) from her home office. "I knew, after 25 years or so spent mostly in the city, that coming to a new town and working from a home office left me at great risk of feeling really isolated," says Snyder, whose business, GOsustainably, helps small businesses leverage online space through websites, social media and video. "I wanted a way to meet new people, make new friends, network and meet up with people on a social level."

She created the group as a "meet-up." "Meetup.com is an amazing organization,"





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she says, "a nonprofit with a wonderful tagline, which is something like: 'Get Online to Get Offline.' You get online to find your interest group, and then the interest groups have events offline." She says she pays about \$20 per month to host the Meetup group (it's free to join), which includes building a website using *Meetup.com's* tools and the cost of maintaining the software. "In my line of work, it would be very simple for me to create my own website," she says, "but then I wouldn't be connected to this amazing organization." She put her WINN website up, and then *Meetup.com* automatically promoted it to other Meetup participants interested in the sorts of activities WINN offers. "Then anytime someone selects a related category, such as 'women's groups,' 'Napa professional' or 'social networking,' it will come up. So that's how people find me."

WINN! has from three to five networking meet-ups each month, including the standing Monday morning "Eat That Frog" meeting, where each attendee is invited to talk about that "important but unattractive thing they've most avoided," which they call your "frog" and which you should "eat" before you do anything else—getting it out of the way and freeing your energy for more productive work.

Of the group's 145 members, usually nine to 13 show up for the Monday meetings. As Snyder describes it, they go around and introduce themselves, briefly describe their business, their job search or the particular area of their professional life that they want to focus on, and then they each name their "frog." Says Snyder, "This is basically the one big 'frog' for the month that they want to eat." The support of the group helps the individuals tackle that difficult aspect of their work lives. "What we've found is that putting it out to the group creates an energy of accountability, and so these things tend to really get done." Later in the month, everybody comes to a social gathering to celebrate their success.

Members of the group can also share expertise when it's appropriate. For example, Snyder is an expert in digital communication, so after months of fielding questions from members, she finally said, "Look, I'm just going to gift this to the group: I'll do a social media training session for everyone in the group who wants to attend."

This kind of sharing works when it's genuinely given in a spirit of helpfulness. "When people have gone in and tried to set up something that was really, very obviously just to sell their product, it's fallen flat. And that's good," Snyder says. "Because if someone's showing up to the group just to sell,

they're clearly not willing to engage on a deeper level."

The group membership includes a variety of independent professionals—a screenwriter, a children's book author/illustrator, a politician, several coaches (life, career, health, financial—even sexual empowerment) and, of course, this being Napa, a number of chefs and women in the wine industry. For Snyder, the membership shows the power of the Internet to bring people together in a real community. "Ever since the Web became available to the masses, there have been those who warned it would be our end," Snyder reflects. "But *Meetup.com* has proved them wrong: Across the globe, people come together online to meet face-to-face, make friends and grow communities.

"I feel like that's definitely happening



WINN's "Spanish Tapas & Sangria at Sunset" pool party (top) and (inset) Consuelo Higdon, hair stylist and one of WINN's early members.



with WINN in Napa, and *Meetup.com* really has made that possible—and we'd love anybody who's interested to come and join us."

Networking in Napa with and about wine
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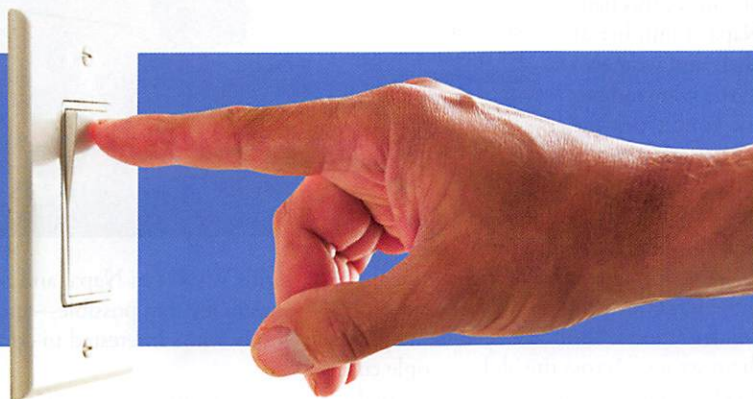
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Christine Mueller (president of the Napa/Sonoma Chapter) addresses attendees at Women for WineSense's annual networking event last August at Chateau Potelle.

ing) chapter being Napa/Sonoma. The tiered membership includes, "professional" (those settled in their careers), "aficionado" (women interested in career changes and consumers simply looking to gain more knowledge) and "young professional/student" (those who are early in their career or studying to get into the wine field).

Why an organization for women in wine? Christine Mueller, president of the Napa/Sonoma Chapter, says the industry is still considered to be at least a good 90 to 95 percent male-run. "Some men can be very generous and foster women's talents," she says, but many women find it difficult to find inroads. So the organization serves as a place for education, networking and enrichment for those who want to experience more of the industry that's central to where they live.

The group includes women who may be new to the area and are looking for a job in the wine industry, or they've already been working in it and, for one reason or another, find themselves suddenly unemployed. "We've had women come to their roundtable meeting [which requires that you have a certain job type in the industry] and say, 'I don't have the job I had at our last meeting, and now I'm looking.' And within a matter of days, someone could say, 'I can connect you with so and so.' And then they can be on their way to a great new job."

The group also welcomes women who think they should get into the wine business. "It's a great way for them to get a sense of the kind of people in this industry," says Mueller. "They can attend some of our roundtables, which include human

resources, finance, marketing, winemaking. There are a number of ways they can sample different things to see what they like.”

Service is part of the culture

As with Connections, Women for WineSense raises money for scholarships at each of its events through silent auctions, raffles and donations (in 2014, the chapter will present \$1,500 to a student studying wine at each of four local colleges: UC Davis, Sonoma State University, Napa Valley College and Santa Rosa Junior College). In addition, anyone can buy a 90-minute “expert session” with one of more than 15 member/experts for a flat donation of \$75 to the fund. This way, women interested in getting into the industry can talk with women who have years of experience, or women who are further into their career can use their 90 minutes as a mentoring session to continue to move up the ladder. This year, the organization is hoping to introduce an official mentoring program, where some of the members at the top level can take on junior members and help shepherd their career.

How great is the wine business for women? “There isn’t one winery position that’s a better fit for women,” says Mueller. “It’s a matter of what their passion is. We do it all, from out in the field all the way to the corporate offices. The area that’s getting the most attention right now is the whole social media side of things.”

“If you think about humans, we’re contextual beings. Everything we do, say and think about happens inside of a context, though sometimes the context is invisible.”

—Rayona Sharpnack, Institute for Women’s Leadership

Mueller says the group’s professional membership has increased about four-fold in the last six years, and its goal is to give people a place to talk about, learn, network and find opportunities in wine or wine-related industries. To that end, it hosts an annual panel called Women in Wine, which last year featured Gina Gallo. The group makes it possible for members to meet people they wouldn’t otherwise have a chance to meet.

“There’s a magical thing about being able to pick up the phone and say, ‘Hi, I’m a member of Women for WineSense, and I’m wondering if I could ask you a couple of questions.’ It’s a magic door-opener for members—particularly for those who want to move up in their careers,” says Marcia Macomber, marketing director. “It’s like having the password to a speakeasy: ‘Oh! You’re a member of Women for WineSense? Let’s meet for a glass of wine or a cup of coffee and talk.’”

Executive coaching at the context level

In San Rafael, the Institute for Women’s Leadership works with female executives to advance their leadership abilities so they can take a “seat at the table” in the highest levels of their organizations. Unlike many training or coaching programs, it focuses not so much on “what you do” or “how to do it,” but on what founder Rayona Sharpnack, former chair of leadership development for Harvard’s Kennedy School, Women’s Leadership Board and consultant to women professionals in Fortune 500 companies across the world, calls the “context” underlying who you are and how you make your business decisions.



The Institute for Women’s Leadership in San Rafael helps female executives reach the highest levels of their organizations.

Founded in 1991, the company has three “work streams”: training (giving workshops within an organization to build community and boost upward mobility), consulting and executive coaching. “Once or twice per year, we do an ‘open-enrollment leadership program,’” Sharpnack says. “This gives women from across sectors, geographies and industries a chance to come together and do some very deep reflection on ‘Who I am as a leader,’ ‘How did I become the leader that I am,’ ‘How is that working for me,’ and ‘Are there

any self-limiting beliefs or blind spots that are keeping me from fulfilling my potential and optimizing my contribution.” Participants completing the training go on to take on “breakthrough projects,” which they may have thought impossible before but can now do because of their newly developed leadership strengths.

Sharpnack works for change on the “contextual” level. “If you think about humans,” she says, “we’re contextual beings. Everything we do, say and think about happens inside of a context, though sometimes the context is invisible.” A context may be part



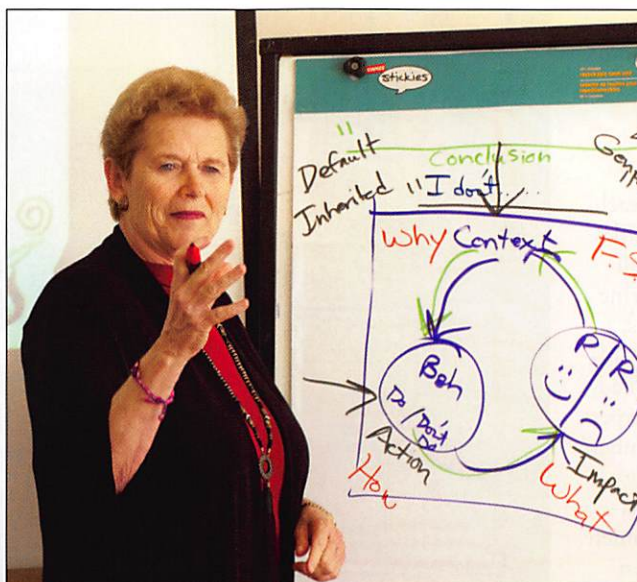
Women for WineSense’s annual networking event, which took place last August at Chateau Potelle.

of an inherited culture that says, 'People should do the right thing,' or that, 'The patient comes first.'

"Our work is to shift the way people think about who they are, who others are, who the customer is and what the opportunity in the marketplace is so they can empower the best context—the ones that are most affirming—and upgrade the ones that are more disempowering."

She believes this work is important and, as a former professional softball player and coach of the Stanford women's softball team, she's seen first-hand the inequalities that still prevail and keep women from bringing their voice—"the voice of reason, the voice of collaboration, the voice of compromise, finding a win-win"—to the table. She's passionate about this. "When I got into professional sports, well, let's say it this way: Just one salary from one athlete in men's sports would have funded an *entire franchise* in women's professional softball."

Her journey since then has been working with women to change that inequity. In 1991, she founded the institute and since then, she's been helping women change the context in which they view and live their professional lives. Sitting back and accepting inequities is not part of her program. "It became clear to me



Rayona Sharpnack is founder and CEO of the Institute for Women's Leadership.

pretty early on that life isn't as fair as I thought it was going to be. That realization, along with a lot of other things, led me to the questions: What can I do? What can one person do to change the world?"

The world is big, and women business leaders—from those in Fortune 500 companies to small business entrepreneurs to independent professionals working in home offices—all have challenges to face. But here in the North Bay, women are facing those challenges together. Women can find their "village" in whatever level of organization they're working in or aspiring to. From high-powered executive coaching to wine-enhanced socials, there are groups here to embrace, mentor, inspire

and provide the sense of community that provides a solid ground for accomplishment and success. Whatever the business, here in the North Bay, women never need to feel alone. ■

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