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Women of action: Leaders open doors for future generations

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DANIEL BOCK / FREELANCE

Author Tina Savas signs a copy of her book "Women of True Grit" at Books and Books in Coral Gables.

It's nearly impossible to imagine a time when there were no female lawyers, accountants or newscasters. The women who forged into those professions fought for credibility and broke the glass ceiling.

Today, women are starting businesses in record numbers, steering the helm of large corporations, and landing political positions in state capitols and high courts. Women regularly pull up seats at conference tables and walk into operating rooms to perform surgery.

A new book, *Women of True Grit*, tells the stories of 40 women who paved the way for others such as the founder of the largest African-American-owned architectural firm in the country, and the first woman CPA in North Dakota. "Women today don't have a clue that they are standing on the shoulders of women before them," said Tina Savas, co-author of *Women of True Grit*. "We've overcome a lot of things, but we have a way to go in making strides."

Women still struggle to achieve parity in pay and they lack significant progress in landing the top spots in big business. Less than 3 percent of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies are held by women, and female MBAs from top schools still earn less and hold jobs at lower levels than males, according to research by Catalyst, a nonprofit dedicated to the advancement of women.

"In many ways, women are stronger than men because they have been discriminated

against by men," Pota Vurnakes Vallas told the book authors. Vallas owned the first interior design firm owned by a Greek woman in North Carolina. Her firm, founded in 1944, grew into a \$5 million company.

Then there's *Today Show* co-host Meredith Viera who recalls in *Women of True Grit* when she was told she wouldn't make it in television news. She went back to her boss and insisted she would. Even more, she landed her first major TV news job at *60 Minutes* a few days before giving birth to her first child. She endured tension with her boss the entire time when she made it clear family was a priority. But that experience didn't deter her career and she's now one of the most recognized faces on television.

Indeed, most of these female pioneers still feel connected to the challenges that still exist today. Here are two of the local women featured in the book and a few more from South Florida we consider to be Women of True Grit.

PATRICIA SEITZ

Patricia Seitz remembers walking into the law offices of Miami's Steel Hector and Davis and discovering she was the only female attorney. "The only person I could ask to go to lunch was a woman paralegal. The guys were terrified, wondering what their wives would think." Yet, she says, male mentors at the firm helped her and made her a better lawyer. Years later, Seitz remembers looking around the firm, seeing dozens of women lawyers and thinking, "this is thrilling."

Seitz, now a federal judge for the U.S. District Court in Miami, made history when she took the helm of The Florida Bar in 1993. She became the first woman president, almost 40 years after the organization was founded. Seitz assumed the post after winning a heated statewide election. "It showed that a female member of the bar could handle a statewide election. It opened the way for women behind me," she says. Indeed, since Seitz's term, three more women have held the position including the current president, Mayanne Downs from Orlando.

She takes pride in the fact that today at least half of the Florida Bar's board of governors are women, compared with two when she joined. "I look back and marvel at where we have come."

ROCKY BOLTON

Rocxy Bolton is one of the few women in Florida who has worked for at least three decades to improve conditions for women. She was Florida's pioneer feminist and the founder of Florida NOW. Bolton's accomplishment made a difference for women. She founded the first Rape Treatment Center in the country in Miami; Women in Distress, the first women's shelter in Florida; Crime Watch, to help stem crime against women; Women's Park and the Women's History Gallery in Miami, another first in the country. Bolton's motto: "Aim high and persevere and never let anything get in your way."

Bolton is responsible for putting women on an equal footing with men in ways that might

seem unimaginable today. Featured in the book, Bolton details how she fought to get Burdines to change its restaurant policy to allow women to sit alongside men. She fought to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed in Florida. She fought to get the new Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Miami to hire women. She fought to get University of Miami to hire female department heads and give equal salaries to men and women doing the same work. She badgered the National Hurricane Center to stop naming hurricanes only after women.

Bolton continues to attend city commission meetings and speak up for equal rights. From her Coral Gables home at age 84, Bolton says: "You have to make it a difference where you can. You can't always succeed but in trying, sometimes you motivate others."

MAJORIE WEBER

When Marjorie Weber started her career in New York City, there were no women with influence in the fields of commercial real estate, finance or mortgage banking. Weber says her colleagues considered her a "tough broad," a term that she disliked. She considered herself a teammate with the men she worked with rather than an adversary.

When she joined Sonnenblick-Goldman in the mid-1960s, many of the men had never worked with a female colleague. Weber got her big break when she landed the job of sales manager. She asked for confirmation that she would get an increase in pay. She was told, "You should not expect to be paid the same because your predecessor was a man with a family and you are a woman." In between sobs, she told her boss "But I'm the mother of two children with financial responsibilities." He gave her the raise. Weber ended up running the well known investment banking firm until 1978 and then moved to Miami as president of Florida Fidelity.

Over the years, Weber experienced the ups and downs of being a player and changing the skylines of Manhattan and Miami through the deals she helped finance. "Sometimes being first was easier for me than for women who followed. Men in later decades felt threatened as the second generation of women tried to step into their shoes," Weber says.

Weber says today, getting ahead no longer has anything to do with gender. "It's not about your sex, but rather learning how to work with people and being a team player." Weber is now vice chair of SCORE in Miami-Dade. Weber says she feels like she's making a difference. "I get a lot of thank-yous."

ELAINE SILVERSTEIN

Launching an advertising agency as a mother of two in the 1970s was considered insanity. But that didn't stop Elaine Silverstein, who partnered with good friend Joyce Beber to open a Miami agency from a small office on Bird Road. Silverstein remembers some of their first meetings with potential clients: "Anyone we knew in business who could afford advertising was male. They were happy to meet with us and give us advice like stay home."

But the two feisty women didn't get deterred and a few lucky breaks, along with some

creativity, put the firm on the radar of some big accounts. One of the firm's first advertising products commissioned by Dade County was the now infamous Miami See It Like a Native Poster. Despite the stir over the female nudity on the poster, the firm was hired by the National Organization for Women to handle its ad campaign.

Silverstein believes the duo's biggest accomplishment was not just selling themselves as women but convincing clients that good work could come from cities outside of New York. "It used to be if you were not there, you were a nobody. That's no longer true." Over the years, the firm has represented Leona Helmsley and her hotel chain, FPL, Humana Health Services and Knight-Ridder.

"We took ourselves and business seriously. We overpaid creative people. We would not settle for mediocrity. We set a high bar. At some point when you do that, people understand that advertising works, especially if you have a good product and the right message," Silverstein said.

Jennifer Beber, daughter of now-retired Joyce, now holds the title of president, once again showing that strong female leadership can keep the firm on the cutting edge as the media world evolves. The firm, Beber Silverstein Group, now has 60 employees offering advertising, public relations and event planning services.

Silverstein continues to play an active role in the firm as chairwoman.

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