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## Sisterhood of Success

*A nationwide CREW of professionals helps women excel in a male-dominated industry*

**By Kandace Power Graves**

Some of the most successful businesswomen in New Orleans are sharing professional resources to advance their companies and their own careers. Commercial Real Estate Women (CREW) New Orleans provides opportunities to network with professionals in all walks of the real estate industry, including architects, developers, brokers, attorneys, interior designers, engineers and consultants, as well as marketing, leasing, property management, financial and title professionals.

The national CREW Network, which has 8,400 members in 68 major real estate markets in the United States and Canada, was designed to put women in the industry on par with men through increased business opportunities and contacts, job banks, professional development seminars and events, industry studies and more. Founded in 1986, it also seeks to realize parity between men and women through networking with professionals in the field, scholarships for college women entering related areas and mentoring female professionals new to the industry.

"Instead of competing with each other, we have really built a stronger community," says Rose LeBreton, president of the 7-year-old CREW New Orleans and a partner at Steeg Law Firm. "(The group) is multi-disciplinary, so when you're putting together a deal, you have an architect, you have construction people — an instant network of resources."

More than 63 percent of CREW members nationwide are company presidents, CEOs, partners or managers. Five years' experience is required to become a member, so women seeking help through the CREW Network know they are working with qualified professionals, even if they are dealing with people in other cities that they've never met.

Locally, regular CREW events mean members get to know each other personally and professionally.

"We're there helping each other," LeBreton says. "We think of each other as a network. The point is to send each other business. If you're going to give away a piece of business, you're going to give it to someone you know. It's a camaraderie."

For architect Angela O'Byrne, a CREW board member and owner of Perez, A Professional Corporation, an architecture, landscape architecture, planning and interior design firm with projects all over the country and in Afghanistan, the network has been invaluable.

"We have opened offices in other cities (New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Houston, San Francisco and Mobile, Ala.), and I am networking to find work in those cities," she says. "[CREW members] are awesome. They can't wait to introduce me to everybody they know."

CREW also provides a network of expertise that is invaluable to members doing business in other cities.

"It's a wealth of knowledge," says Donna Taylor, senior vice-president of asset management and new business development at Stirling Properties, which is developing a 1-million-square-foot shopping complex in Hammond. "You can go to principal in any of the groups. If you have a question about laws in New York because you're interested [in doing a project there], you can call on CREW in New York to resolve the question."

In both local meetings and national conventions, women exchange ideas about the best way to do business and devise new ways to structure real estate deals.

"We focus on particular matters that may be affecting our industry — green building, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification and requirements — and providing more knowledge about the matters I deal with on a daily basis and connecting me with the senior management," Taylor says. "There's a possibility that a connection I have with CREW members may get us a new project."

Building strong businesses also helps the local economy. The Hammond Square shopping center project, for instance, portends the viability of other economic development, Taylor says. "It shows that these retailers that we've gone to, the lenders, etc., think that the economy is going to turn around and that the crossroads of I-10 and I-12 is just that and will be a great economic boost to this area and the state."

After Hurricane Katrina, O'Byrne started the nonprofit City-Works, to pair indigent homeowners with architects who provide design services for minimal or no cost, with a focus on the sustainable rebuilding of New Orleans. She is former president of the group and now serves as secretary of its board.

"I want to bring the benefits of my business to New Orleans and help it come back stronger than it was before," O'Byrne says. "So many companies have moved outside the city, but in my office we're all pretty committed to that vision. Having work in other places, though, lets us be a stronger company."

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