

Entrepreneurial background informs strategy at women's business center



Sara Vescio, the new executive director of the Women's Business Center at Canisius College, seeks to make the center a training and networking base for women involved in all stages of business. John Hickey/Buffalo News on October 5, 2014 - 12:04 AM

Sara L. Vescio's mother owned an interior design company, Vescio Interiors, and later became a Decorating Den franchisee. Vescio's grandfather founded Parmed Pharmaceuticals, which her father ran as vice president for a number of years in her early childhood. One of her aunts had a catering business, another owned a retail shop, and her uncle operated a moving company.

Although her childhood was immersed in entrepreneurship, Vescio arrived at Niagara University with dreams of becoming the next Oprah Winfrey.

Her goal wasn't necessarily to become a TV talk show queen, but like Oprah, she wanted to use her occupation as a vehicle for social justice.

As executive director of the Women's Business Center at Canisius College, Vescio's latest occupation allows her to marry her business acumen with her humanitarian urge.

The Grand Island native stepped into the job as an interim almost a year ago and was formally named executive director in May, after working as the center's program director. She had been the director of development at the Boys & Girls Club and was the reunion giving/volunteer manager at Niagara University for five years.

The center at Demerly Hall at 2365 Main St., near Jewett Avenue, was created in 2003 to provide networking, technical training and support to female entrepreneurs.

Emma Sapon: What is your vision for the center?

Sara Vescio: I am looking to have the Women's Business Center be the home of women entrepreneurship, so women business owners at all phases of business can come here as their home base when they need education, connection and community. That's what our mission breaks down to, that we empower women business owners with education connection and community to bring them more success and growth. Basically, we continue to develop training and networking opportunities to empower women business owners to grow their business. However, we are now working to support women business owners at every stage of their business growth. We are also building relationships with the experts and the agencies in the area that could be helpful to business owners and collaborating with them to bring a wider and stronger net of support to the business owner.

ES: How are you applying your drive for social justice in your position?

SV: The mission of the WBC is to empower women to succeed. The fact that women as a gender are "catching up" in business is a social injustice to begin with. What has happened in the past is the past but let's deal with now and going forward. How do I help our community to support these women business owners? How can I help these business owners get the training, connections and support they need to find the success they want? These are the questions I ask myself to drive my strategic plans for the center.

ES: What are some of the challenges facing women's entrepreneurs?

SV: The difficulty for women is receiving loans for their business support. That's a national issue that's also local. There are many reasons. Men tend to make decisions at banks and might view women's business ideas as not viable since women tend to create soft businesses, addressing family related issues. Also, it could be an issue of writing a business plan and being prepared to present to a loan officer. Since getting the position, I've been out in the community, talking to women, gathering information, trying to figure out what women need from us. And some feel women feel they are not given opportunities. If that is an issue that they are not getting the chances, we're trying to create connection for them. So there are different avenues to take in helping make those connections.

ES: Any changes in the future for the center?

SV: I've listened, strategized, developed and vow to continue that cycle. I listened to what's happening in the community: our clients, business owners who aren't our clients and other

service providers for women and entrepreneurs. I strategized with my board, team and other agencies in the community to figure out how everyone could fit together to be most effective. I developed new collaborative relationships and new programming to fill those gaps and connect the pieces for our WNY entrepreneurs. I vow to continue this cycle so that the center stays at the forefront of empowering woman-owned businesses and current with the community's needs.

ES: What are the major issues hindering female entrepreneurs? What is the center doing to address them?

SV: Lack of access to capital. We are holding a 'Finance Bootcamp' six-week course with our SBA resource partners. Participants will learn how to use their business plans to guide their financing needs; pull together the financial statements, put together a pitch for the loan proposal and get connected with lenders in our community. Thanks to Evans Bank and a private contributor, this past summer we started our own 'Success Stimulus Competition' which contributed \$5,000 to a woman business owner who had a need to grow and a plan to do, but just needed some more funding to push her business success. We have plans to grow this initiative to hold a larger pool of funding from our community players who are interested in backing this segment of economic development in WNY.

Business training is another one. Many women start a business to give themselves a job and do something they enjoy. We are here to train them in all of the other areas that are important in running a successful business, as well as to empower them to push beyond having a job to real business success.

ES: How has your early exposure to entrepreneurship helped you?

SV: Parents are your first and probably most important teachers. My mother exposed me to the ins and outs of being a woman-business owner and her challenges, and my father gave me exposure to the perks and challenges of being a part of a family-owned business. Both being very intelligent, ambitious and entrepreneurial, I learned from them the importance to always represent yourself well and professionally. Sales come with building relationships, which come from trust. And frankly, that balancing it all is a challenge. Be strategic, rely on your strengths and hire for your weaknesses and enjoy it.

ES: With so much going on with the Medical Campus and downtown, what are you doing to make sure women entrepreneurs get in on the action?

SV: When the dig Center (on the medical campus) was coming along, we had our Sister Mixers and other networking programs over there. Construction was not even done but we took a tour. As a center we want to stay on top of what's happening here, either when it's happening or before it happens. And then they help to show our women business owners what's going on and how they can get involved.

ES: Next year, Hank Sokol will become the first male board president of the Women's Business Center. Why have a man in such a high profile, leadership position at an institution serving women?

SV: We really want to make sure the Women's Business Center is practicing what we want to happen in our community, and that's male support for women's business. We know as far as the connections we're building for women, if we only build connections from other women business owner to themselves, then we are cutting off 50 percent of their opportunities. We want to make sure we are also bringing opportunities of male-oriented, male-driven or male-owned businesses. We need to make the connection for the whole community and make sure that men and women alike are supporting our local business owners.

ES: So why even have a business center for women?

SV: If there comes a point where there is no gender bias in our community and there is no sexism in our business world, I believe our programs will be a business center, no longer a women's business center. But while we still think that exists, we have a comfortable atmosphere where women can come, ask questions and get all the information they need and can walk out the door, feeling like they've learned.