

NEWS

'Women of tomorrow.' Stark professionals discuss navigating self-doubt, career challenges

Robert Wang The Repository

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Key Points

Elaine Russell-Reolfi switched careers and became CEO of Commquest.

Rachel Hagemeyer talked about becoming an orchestra CEO at age 25.

Some advice from Stephanie Werren: "Take chances."

CANTON – Elaine Russell-Reolfi remembers a time years ago when she lost her composure at work.

She was a department head and someone involved in a project had made a mistake.

Another executive was infuriated, blaming her for the error. His voice raised, he left her a scathing voicemail message. He then escalated the situation by directing the phone system to send copies of the message to others at the company.

More: Support these Stark County women-owned restaurants during Women's History Month

A mortified Russell-Reolfi went to a conference room to catch her breath and shed a few tears. A female colleague brought Russell-Reolfi's purse as she requested and comforted her. Russell-Reolfi then pulled herself together. She held a meeting with her coworkers and insisted that they could not treat each other this way.

"I found my voice in that adversity," she said.

Years later, Russell-Reolfi made a major career change in her early 50s. She went onto become the CEO of Commquest in 2021, the local provider of mental health and addiction

recovery services.

"And maybe you fail and that's OK, too. Because you learn a lot when you fail. And I think if you never fail, you're probably not pushing yourself hard enough," she said.

Russell-Reolfi was one of six speakers Wednesday evening at the panel discussion "Women of Tomorrow: Stark County and Beyond." The Stark County District Library and the group Women's Impact Inc. organized the women's history event at the Cultural Center of the Arts. Between 100 and 150 attended. Organizers and the panelists sought to inspire young women and girls to a successful career path.

The discussion's moderator was Maureen Ater, vice president of marketing and development for Goodwill Industries of Greater Cleveland and East Central Ohio. She talked about how a century ago, women's career opportunities were significantly more limited, often restricted to certain fields like clerical, teaching and nursing.

Building confidence in your career

The panelists discussed their struggles to build their confidence earlier in their careers. And they often brought up experiencing the common but false feeling that they were alone in their situations.

Ater referred to the slights often experienced by women in the workplace.

Like the time early in her career when a male colleague asked her to make him coffee.

"The joke's on you because I don't even know how to make coffee," Ater recalled herself thinking.

Russell-Reolfi said a man once told her he wasn't hiring her because she was "too nice."

Liz Hand, a financial adviser for Canton-based Pleasant Wealth, talked about how she had to take nine months off from school at the age of 6 due to rheumatoid arthritis. For a long time after she returned to school she dealt with the anxiety of feeling constantly behind and missing something. As she took the reins of her family's business, it took her a while to realize she wasn't really missing anything.

Carrilyn Long, a program manager for the Ohio Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Representation and a Waynesburg native, emphasized the importance of having people in

your life who will tell you their honest thoughts of what you need to hear but don't want to hear.

"I only surround myself with positive people. If somebody's negative, they're not in my circle," Long said.

She said she was training to be a nurse for years. But then she realized she didn't want to be a nurse. Long wanted to be an educator.

"Don't pick a career because you're going to make a lot of money," said Long, who worked a few years as a social worker for Stark County Department of Jobs and Family Services.

Rachel Hagemeyer on becoming CEO at age 25

Rachel Hagemeyer talked about being hired to be the president and CEO of the Canton Symphony Orchestra in November at the age of 25.

"My career started four years ago," she said.

Hagemeyer shared her story of "fake" applying for the Canton Symphony Orchestra's open position for community engagement and education manager. She had to do it to fulfill a program requirement as she finished Baldwin Wallace University's Conservatory of Music. To her surprise, the orchestra offered her the job.

When the CEO position became vacant about three years later, she hesitated. Hagemeyer asked the female executive directors of other orchestras for advice.

"I wanted to be the CEO of an organization and I thought I would maybe do that by 40," she said. Hagemeyer said one of the executive directors told her, "Rachel, if you were a man, you would not be questioning applying for this job. If you were a man, you would just apply for it."

Hagemeyer said she's learned that age doesn't define success. Authenticity does. And she said she's learned to accept that she doesn't always have the answers.

Panelist Stephanie Werren is the vice president of leadership programs at Leadership Stark County and a member of North Canton City Council.

Around 1991, she was graduating from Miami University when a business in Massillon offered her a job selling carpets. The offer was later withdrawn, she said.

She decided to go to Hawaii to work on a cruise ship, which she did for about a year, rising to the position of the captain's waitress. Werren said she was exposed to different cultures as well as being able to enjoy new types of food.

"Take chances," Werren encouraged.