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CREW Boston: 35 years of inspiring women in CRE - by Cara Nelson

March 03, 2017 - Front Section

Cara Nelson, CREW Boston

Thirty-five years ago, a dozen young professional women working in the real estate industry in the Boston area had a vision. They saw a need to provide women in the Boston area commercial real estate community with educational experiences related to the industry and to have an opportunity to network with other women in the industry. They spent countless breakfasts in the dining room of one of their cohorts brainstorming, planning and getting to know one another. It was through that process that their vision became a reality –NEWiRE (now known as CREW Boston, consistent with the name of a national organization that formed later) was born.

This year is CREW Boston's 35th anniversary, and we recently had a celebration at the Harvard Club and an opportunity to hear the story directly from the founding members at an anniversary celebration. Their short-term goal was to create an organization that would have 75 dues-paying members within a year. Their long-term goal was for that same organization to go out of business, because that would indicate that an organization intended for women in the commercial real estate industry would no longer be necessary—that parity had been achieved and that the number of women in the industry was about the same as the number of men. It didn't take long to achieve the short-term goal. The long-term goal, well, as I mentioned -- we just celebrated the 35th anniversary of CREW Boston, and we are going strong!

As I reflected on the goals of CREW Boston's founders I was struck at the growth of the organization. We are now approximately 500 members strong. We have multiple committees, specialized topical groups, opportunities for educational experiences, networking, mentoring, professional development and more. And although it's no secret that there are many fewer women in the commercial real estate industry than men, even if the numbers were comparable and we had achieved the parity that the founders were seeking, I would propose that there will always be a need for CREW Boston.

As many CREW Boston members would report, there is something special about a gathering of 250+ women in the industry at our monthly luncheons, many of whom have been members of the organization for more than 20 years. As we have grown we have stretched to do our best to provide for the needs of all of our members. We celebrate and provide opportunities for our new members, and we honor our legacy members (i.e., members with a membership tenure of at least 15 years or a past president of the organization). Each year we provide our members with an opportunity to meet with legacy members in a series of small group lunches hosted by a legacy member. Our members have the benefit of hearing from some of the most seasoned women in the industry about their path to success and why they have continued to stay active in CREW Boston.

Two of our legacy members who will be hosting small group lunches for our members this spring are

Kathryn Cochrane Murphy, partner at Krokidas & Bluestein and one of the founding members of CREW Boston, and Tabettha McCartney, director of asset management and sustainability at the Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly. I recently had the opportunity to hear from each of Kathy and Tabettha on their reasons for continuing their involvement in CREW Boston after being members for many years. Kathy reports that “CREW Boston has provided me with a lifetime network of supporters – wonderful women who have become close friends and clients, women who have invited me to be on the boards of their organizations or hired me to be their lawyer – and has also given me a chance to get to know younger women on their way up and to share with them my enthusiasm for the commercial real estate world in Boston.” Tabettha said: “The networking and programs facilitated by CREW continue to teach me new things and force me to think about things in different ways. I am constantly introducing young women with whom I work to CREW so that they can benefit not only from the programs but from the support, encouragement and affirmation that this amazing group of women shower upon each other. I always leave a CREW event feeling great about my career choices and what lies ahead for me.”

The reasons for joining and continuing to be involved are many and are as varied as there are members. Although our founders’ long-term goal has yet to be achieved, the story of the beginnings and their foresight into the needs that CREW Boston fulfills for so many women at all stages of their careers is inspiring. To our founders, we thank you and we hope that we are doing you proud.

Cara Nelson, partner at DLA Piper, is the 2016-2017 president of CREW Boston.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540