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2019 Women Who Build: Cathy DeFrances, Fuss & O'Neill, Inc.

February 15, 2019 - Connecticut

Name: Cathy DeFrances

Position: Business Line Manager

Company: Fuss & O'Neill, Inc.

How many years have you been in your current field? 30+

Which project, deal or transaction was the “game changer” in the advancement of your career during the last 10 years? New Haven had just embarked on an ambitious school construction program and the architectural firm where I was the director of administration and marketing designed the renovate/as new Truman Elementary School. It was a tremendous project for the small firm, and everyone there played a role in making it a success. As a “give-away” at the grand opening, we printed shirts for all the kids with their new logo (designed by our graphic designer). When we saw how proud the families were of this new school, how empowered the teachers and administrators were, and how it brightened a pretty dismal part of the city, together with 300 elementary school students singing in their new gymnasium, I realized that I had more than a great job, I had an impactful, important career.

What are you doing differently in 2019 that has had a positive impact on your career? I am more collaborative. I strive to think about everything from the standpoint, “How can this help someone else?”

What was your first job and what did you learn from it? My first job was babysitting. When you're only a child yourself (I started at 14 years old), you quickly learn to negotiate and bargain with the kids you are charged with and to stand up for yourself when parents try to take advantage (either willingly or absent-mindedly).

Who are three women – living or dead – that you would like to have drinks with and why?

1. My mom, because I miss her every day, and she was completely fearless.
2. My nana, because she taught me to work hard, always do your best, and to never let anyone treat you differently just because you were a woman.

3. Carrie Fisher, because she was a Hollywood princess, star, and seemed like a crazy, super-cool person.

What were your biggest fears when you started out in your profession? That I couldn't talk the talk of architecture because I wasn't an architect. And while I am still not an architect, I've learned about the craft from some of the most talented people. I have such respect for good architecture, from the good practice of architectural firms that I have come to terms with the absence of a degree.

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