



Women in Code Leadership: What It Takes to Make It to the Top

By Sara Yerkes, SVP, Government Relations, ICC

AT THE CODE COUNCIL, WOMEN play an important role in our world of technical code development, in disciplines ranging from building codes to fire safety, plumbing, architecture, engineering and code enforcement. This extends to our leadership; for example, Ann VonWeller was president of our Board of Directors during a critical time in ICC's history. Of course, I could name others, but I won't because it would be unfair to exclude anyone. We respect them all.



Sara Yerkes, Senior Vice President for Government Relations, ICC

Memorable Mentors

Sometimes it is difficult for me to believe that I have been involved in the codes and standards community as long as I have. I started in 1982 and remember that in my early days I was frequently the only woman in the room. I worked in a predominantly male world, but I took advantage

of my good fortune of working with men who were leaders in their fields of expertise.

In those days, available mentors were invariably male. Two that I considered mentors have since died, but I think frequently about them and I am so appreciative of the opportunities they gave me. They treated me with respect and as a professional colleague. One was Jack Gerard, my boss for eight years. Jack never had the opportunity to go to college, but he was one of the best-educated and well-read people I have known. He had a vocabulary like Webster. He was a dynamic speaker and a visionary in his field. He worked his way up the professional ladder, reach-



A WICED History: How an ICC Chapter for Women was Born

At some point prior to the Final Action Hearings in Rochester, New York, in May 2007, an email was circulated to women involved in code enforcement and/or development. Shirley Muns, a building codes official in Houston, was behind the effort to gather as many women as possible in Rochester for the purpose of creating an International Code Council (ICC) Chapter where women could network for advocacy, education and mentoring. She had the idea for quite some time and, thanks to Jon Traw, a past president and CEO of the International Conference of Building Officials legacy organization, the chapter was given its name: Women in Code Enforcement and Development (WICED).

Approximately 18 women gathered for the initial meeting in Rochester, which resulted in a tentative slate of officers: President – Shirley Muns, Energy Codes Specialist at Energy Systems Laboratory, TEES, Texas A&M University System; Vice President – Sarah Rice, a Certified Building Official and staff member of the Cincinnati-based Preview Group; and Secretary/Treasurer – Eirene Oliphant, Building Official for Leawood, Kansas. The group met again in Reno, Nevada, in conjunction with the ICC Annual Business Meeting that year, and agreed thereafter to meet only when the Code Council holds

its Annual Conference and Business Meeting. The members submitted a Code Council Chapter application in December 2007 with a membership of 33 women. WICED received status as a professional ICC Chapter in February 2008 at the Code Development Hearings in Palm Springs, California. In September 2008 in Minneapolis, Code Council Board Member John Darnall recognized the group for receiving its ICC Chapter status and formally installed Muns, Rice and Oliphant into what had been their tentative Chapter officer positions.

WICED Chapter Members felt the effects of the economic downturn as several members lost their jobs. As a result, much of the momentum that had developed quickly disappeared. A small group met in Charlotte, North Carolina, in October 2010 to discuss how to move the Chapter forward. Because of the large geographic area the Chapter serves, they decided to activate a [Chapter website](#), that would play a vital role in communication with and recruitment of new members. They also decided to solicit new officers and board members.

If you are interested in getting more information about, or participating in, WICED, send an email to info@wicedicc.org.

ing the highest level within his organization. He was a retired fire chief and a past director of the Board of Directors of the organization for which we worked. He taught me so much without me realizing at the time that I was receiving the best preparation for my

own professional development. It was truly a privilege having worked with and for him.

In addition to the respect I had for him professionally, he made going to work enjoyable. He was funny and loved to tell stories. He had a huge spirit. Our

own CEO here at ICC [Rick Weiland] reminds me once in a while that it is important to like and enjoy the people with whom we work, and this is so true.

Someone has probably written a book about my second mentor, David Gratz. He was extremely



Cindy Davis

International Code Council Board Member Cindy Davis is the Building Official and Zoning Officer for Butler Township, Pennsylvania. A 20-year veteran of municipal code enforcement, Davis holds numerous professional certifications. As a Code Official, she has served on numerous technical code committees, exam development committees and the Board of International Professional Standards. She was honored as Commonwealth Building Officials (Pennsylvania) Code Official of the Year in 2002. Davis currently serves on the Executive Committee of Commonwealth Building Officials Chapter of ICC, as well as on the Executive Committee

for Pennsylvania Building Officials Conference. She also serves on the IAS Board, and currently chairs the Education Committee and the Code Development Review Ad-Hoc Committee (CDRAC).

We asked Davis about her perspective on women leaders in the codes industry.

Q: Have you seen more women becoming code officials?

A: Yes. I'm not sure what is bringing more women into the industry. ... When I began attending code-related classes – seminars, conferences, Chapter meetings – back in the late '80s, early '90s, I was almost always the only woman there. That has happily changed ... It's much

more accepted for women to be in what has traditionally been a male-dominated profession.

I remember one of the early conferences I attended for one of the legacy groups. After the opening ceremony at the annual conference, the president of the legacy organization stood up and said, "The women are now dismissed." [They were being directed to] the companions' program. I said, "Wow, well that's interesting." There I am, sitting at the conference as a code official. I remember leaning over to somebody and saying, "I wonder if he would mind if I stayed?"

Q: Do you think there are any special skills that women bring to the table when it comes to enforcing building codes?

A: I do, and I think those skills ... are useful for any profession. I think women are often able to read people better and be more forthright and diligent in their actions related to enforcement. I think that's helpful in the long run. I also believe that, because it is generally recognized as a male-dominated field, women are being tested by contractors to see exactly how much they can be pushed. I think that women in the profession generally have a tendency to be more careful. We really make sure we know what we are doing.

demanding but never demanded more from others than himself. It was a good relationship because I liked being challenged. I still do. It makes the job, and life, exciting.

David's compliments were like gold stars on a

report card. I learned from him that empowerment works with accountability and personal responsibility.

I have many funny stories about experiences those of us who had the privilege of working with him lived through, but I remember him primarily for his

leadership. He was a kind man with a soft spot in his heart for his pet rabbit. Not too many people knew that David, the fierce leader, had a bunny rabbit that followed him around the house like a puppy dog. A good heart is essential because the best bosses, and

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Q: Have you talked to other women about getting involved in the industry?

A: I have. I started as a permit technician. I always encourage the folks doing that work now to continue their education. There is absolutely no reason why they have to stop at being a permit technician. They can continue and join the ranks of the profession just like anyone else.

Q: Was it ever your ambition to be where you are now, a Code Council Board Member?

A: It eventually became a goal, yes. As with anything, as I started in the business ... [I had] a steep learning curve. You're not even aware of the extent of opportunities until you've been involved for a while. Probably the very first thing I became involved

with was the training and education committee with [the legacy organization] BOCA International. ... As I decided to try to pursue certifications, training and education became important to me. And, as I happened to see that there was a call for committee members for training and education, I applied very early in my career and that's what got me started.

Q: So, you were simply following your passion and your interests. And it became clear that leadership in some of these committees and eventual Board membership was something to which you aspired.

A: Yes.

Q: Have you been involved in any formal or informal mentoring programs?

A: It would be informal. ... There is a core group of us that band together at conferences. WICED [pronounced "wicked"] is Women in Code Enforcement and Development. It's an ICC Chapter. They received their charter just a few years ago. That has been a good group. They try to meet at the code change hearings and the conferences (see [WICED sidebar, page 2](#)).

So, formally, there is the chapter for women in ICC, and, informally, I think we often support each other and encourage each other when we get the opportunity.

Q: When you started out, who inspired or mentored you?

A: I'd have to say, strangely enough, that the folks who encouraged me and mentored me the most were

men. It could just be my geographic area of Pennsylvania, but there just weren't any [women]. In fact, shortly after I began my committee work, it was actually an officer, Mike Perrone, Past President of BOCA International, who took me aside and began mentoring me. He absolutely supported me throughout my entire career.

So many others offered mentoring throughout the years. I will tell you [two] women that I've always admired have been Becky Baker and [former ICC Board Member] Barbara Koffron. Barbara, being the only woman on the Board when I was elected, certainly reached out and helped. Now, it's nice having Tina [Rakes, fellow ICC Board Member].



Tina Rakes

International Code Council (ICC) Board Member Tina Rakes is a Building Official for Baldwin City, Kansas, where she supervises the Building Inspection, Planning, Zoning and Code Enforcement divisions. She was elected to the Board Section D seat that includes the states of Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky, as well as the province of Ontario. Rakes holds several certifications, is a Past President of the Heart of America and Western Kansas Chapters and has advocated building safety on Capitol Hill.

We asked Rakes about her perspective on women leaders in the codes industry.

Q: Was it difficult for others to accept you in this field as a woman?

A: Growing up in Dodge City, Kansas, where not so long ago cowboys roamed, it took a few years to catch up with the mainstream norm of “the bigger cities,” and it was quite unheard of for women to work in a male-dominated field like one related to construction. With a carpenter’s background, my passion to learn the codes coupled with humility, I developed good relationships within the commu-

nity and with contractors in the built environment. “Pillars” of the community didn’t have reservations about informing me that they thought it wasn’t appropriate to have a woman in the construction field, particularly in code enforcement, but over time, they admitted I had earned their trust and respect.

Q: Do you notice more women becoming code officials?

A: Recently, I haven’t witnessed additional women entering positions of administering building codes in my area, but this could be due, in part, to the slow economy not warranting the need for additional personnel.

Q: Other than the slow economy, why do you think this might be the case?

A: One theory might be that, unless a woman is in pursuit of an architecture or engineering degree, or exposed to a construction environment in her life, she is unlikely to be exposed to the family of codes, which, in turn, may spark an interest in the profession of code administration.

Q: Do women tend to bring any special skills to the table in this industry?

A: Frankly, there is room for everyone at the table. I prefer to believe this professional industry opens the door to men and women alike who possess the willingness to discover the art and science of building inspection. If we speak in terms of men or women bringing special skills to the table, we run the risk of missing something important.

Q: Are you mentoring anyone?

A: I mentor my employees, but there’s more to it than that. My adult working life has been in the construction industry, so I try to be an active role model for young people, to expose them to the opportunities they can create for themselves in our profession. The shop teacher at our local high school invites me each year to speak to his architecture class. I embark on this opportunity with enthusiasm because it’s a chance to share my passion for what I do. I walk them through how the codes are developed, followed up with how to use them. I also mention the great career options related to codes.

therefore good leaders, provide emotional and professional support and inspire confidence.

Developing Good Leaders

The mentors I have enjoyed, and the women I admire, share a common approach toward leadership. An important aspect of leadership is the ability to work and relate well with others. Good leaders motivate and create a teamwork approach. Negative, unpleasant and/or difficult people sap all the positive energy out of a room. These people are not leaders.

A good leader is available and in touch with people. A good leader creates a harmonious work environment. A good leader is honest, open and approachable. A good leader knows how to use his or her authority appropriately. Good leaders are loyal and respectful and expect the same in return.

By contrast, domineering ways are ineffective. Intimidation is not a leadership skill. Bullying is never good. Successful leaders are sensitive to circumstances.

People in management positions have a responsibility to guide and provide opportunities for rising stars. I am very fortunate to work for leaders at ICC who treat me with respect and appreciate my work. There is nothing more empowering than knowing

this. It makes me want to do more and do it better.

In appreciation for the guidance I've received and hoping to encourage more women in our field, I have decided that one of my focuses this year will be to encourage mentoring. As part of my mentoring focus, our Government Relations Department is developing a presentation on leadership skills.

Celebrating Women Leaders

In early December, I was invited to attend a breakfast hosted by the [New York Women's Agenda \(NYWA\)](#). NYWA is a powerful coalition of women's organizations, founded in 1992 by the late Elinor Guggenheimer. It brings women's organizations



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Q: Are there mostly boys taking these classes?

A: The number of girls fluctuates from year to year. Predominately, boys fill the class, with two or three girls enrolling annually.

Q: Any mentors, male or female, that you had during your career?

A: First and foremost, I am forever indebted to then Building Official Richard Brown, for recognizing my desire to become a building inspector and believing in the commitment I would bring to the organization and construction industry. I would also



Patricia Lancaster, a former Buildings Commissioner for New York City, was one of the women honored as a 2010 Rising Star by the New York Women's Agenda for her work in the revision of the city's construction code and its transition to a modern code based on the I-Codes.

like to take this opportunity to recognize Building Official Tim Ryan, Building Official Jerry Mallory and the Program Manager of Contractor Licensing Sean Reid, each who have unselfishly provided me with their knowledge from experience in our profession, which, in turn, has aided my ability to grow as a professional. To this day, I am continually blessed with the generous support of remarkable people during my career. I consider it one of my most important endeavors to share what they have taught me with the new generation of code and construction professionals.



Approximately 2,000 people attended a luncheon honoring 2010 Rising Stars, sponsored by the New York Women's Agenda – a coalition of women's organizations.

together to speak in one voice to raise awareness in political, economic and cultural circles and to improve the lives of women and their families. Approximately 2,000 people attended last year's event.

I was invited because one of the women honored as a 2010 Rising Star was Patricia Lancaster, a former Buildings Commissioner for New York City. Patricia is an architect by training. NYWA honored her for her work in the revision of the city's construction code and its transition to a modern code based on the I-Codes.

Patricia Lancaster is a role model. She was the first woman to serve as Buildings Commissioner, overseeing the nation's largest building department with more than 975,000 buildings and regulating New York City's \$35 billion per year construction industry. She took on the incredible task of overhauling the processes and procedures of the New York Buildings Department to bring transparency, accountability and efficiency into its operations. And, on top of all this, she undertook the huge responsibility of revising the city's building code and setting modern, up-to-date local construction standards. We are so



**Dottie Harris, Vice President,
State & Local Government
Relations, ICC**

honored that the city, under her leadership, chose to base its regulations on the I-Codes.

I was there with another successful woman in her own right. My colleague, Dottie Harris, is a vice president with ICC,

and is young, intelligent, self-motivated and an inspiration to other women. She previously worked for the New York State Legislature and eventually Governor Pataki appointed her Deputy Secretary of State. She was instrumental in getting the I-Codes adopted by the State of New York. She served on the Code Council Board until she came to work for ICC's Government Relations Department and has since added to her list of accomplishments, including her involvement with the New York City adoption of the I-Codes.

Dottie and I were both honored to be among those amazing women and men who have accomplished incredible feats. Some have survived life's cruelest blows and have succeeded against all odds.

Integrity and strength of character are leadership qualities.

Saranne Rothberg and her daughter, Lauriel Harte Marger, were two other 2010 Rising Stars honored by NYWA. Doctors diagnosed Saranne with stage IV cancer when her daughter was five-years-old. After the initial shock and going through many surgeries and chemotherapy, she decided she was going to take what life had thrown her way with humor. She has created a therapeutic humor group and helped over 650,000 people rediscover their funny bones. Her daughter was named a United Nations "Youth Advisor" and World Health Organization "Health Champion." This mother and daughter team have done so many things that it would take many pages to list them all. The most important thing to remember is that their example demonstrates that leaders take chances. Successful people set their own expectations and consistently exceed the expectations of others.

Recognizing Our Own

We have incredible leaders throughout the Code Council family, both women and men, including those in our Chapters. The Code Council's Government Relations Department will be recognizing some

of them in the course of this year. We'll write about how our Chapters have shown leadership in creating programs to mentor young people, about the challenges of running a one-person building department and provide a closer look at some wonderful people. Stay tuned. **bsj**

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