Women Leading the Way on Long Island: Having It All, in Your Own Way

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In the decades since Cosmopolitan editor Helen Gurley Brown’s famous book Having It All was published in 1982, the title has transformed from words of encouragement to a hated cliché – an elusive and even judgmental standard that pressures some women to ask themselves why their nonstop balancing act between the competing demands of work and family isn’t as effortless as in the movies.

The message from Christine Malafi, Partner at Campolo, Middleton & McCormick, LLP, is therefore an important one: “You can’t ‘have it all’ the way the media portrays, but you can do it in your own way.”

Malafi spoke at HIA-LI’s sixth annual women’s leadership breakfast, “Women Leading the Way: A Discussion with Women CEOs” on December 2, 2016, where she was joined by Dr. Christine Riordan, President of Adelphi University; Neela Mukherjee Lockel, CEO of American Red Cross on Long Island; Judith Heller, Assistant Vice President of Physician Recruitment at Northwell Health; and Karen Davis-Farage, Co-Owner and President of Pole Position Raceway. Domenique Camacho-Moran, Partner at Farrell Fritz, moderated the dynamic panel, drawing in the crowd as she weaved throughout the packed room of 200 attendees. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who was instrumental in creating the event in 2010, addressed the room via video message on the topic of women’s leadership.

Camacho-Moran reminded the crowd that although women have long played a significant role in the economy, they still are not proportionally represented in leadership roles and professional positions, and continue to earn less than men. The women on the panel “defied the odds” as they embarked on their unique career paths.

Like Malafi, Dr. Riordan acknowledged that success is not one-size-fits-all. “Success comes in many forms. It’s not our job to judge others.” The first woman to serve as Adelphi’s president, she encouraged attendees to take risks in their careers and try things that frighten them. In the workplace, women shouldn’t shy away from expressing what they need to succeed.

Davis-Farage observed that many successful women “don’t always realize our accomplishments when they are happening.” Recalling a difficult period in 2009 when the recession abruptly ended her 32-year career in the software industry, Davis-Farage shared that she needed to take time to mourn the loss. But she emerged from the experience with a fresh perspective and the desire to apply her skillset to a new industry. Davis-Farage is now an owner of the first Pole Position Raceway indoor electric go-karting facilities on the East Coast.

Surrounding herself with a support system got her through the most difficult times. “Everyone has angels and coaches, and they don’t always come from where you expect.”

Heller emphasized the importance of preparation and initiation. Her career took her through public policy positions to hospital administration and eventually to Northwell. Throughout her career, “whenever I saw a gap or a need, I took it upon myself to fill it.” She stressed the need to “do your homework. Before a meeting, make sure you know your info cold and that you know what others are thinking.” This drive has not only advanced her career, but also created a role model for her two young daughters: “They think I can do anything.”

Lockel’s career path has focused on humanitarian work: the New Jersey native studied social work and eventually came to Long Island where she joined Girls Inc., a new organization at the time that she helped build before moving to her current role at the American Red Cross. Lockel noted that “as women, we feel compelled to fulfill certain roles.” Her advice, especially to young women starting their careers, is “to find someone who believes in you and will give you feedback.” Her mother taught her from an early age that “there was nothing I couldn’t do. Women need to support other women.”

Malafi also drew strength from her parents, who told her and her two sisters that “girls can do anything.” Malafi’s legal career has spanned a variety of roles and sectors: in 2004, she was appointed Suffolk County Attorney, the first woman and youngest person ever appointed to the position. The trial lawyer then made the unusual transition to senior corporate counsel to a major manufacturing company before joining Campolo, Middleton & McCormick as chair of the Corporate department. “People said no one switches from being a trial lawyer to a transactional attorney, but I was going to do it. I worked 24 hours a day on learning how to make it happen.” Her message is that you don’t look at the risk; you look at the end game, “then figure out how to get there.”

The panel’s candid advice made an impression on the attendees. Randi Busse, President of Workforce Development Group, shared: “I thought it was important that all of the panelists spoke about the need to surround yourself with a good support network, and that it’s okay to ask for and receive help.”

Devon Palma, an associate attorney at Campolo Middleton who attended the event with her father, said that “the panel gave me a roadmap to follow as I begin to build my own network and seek out mentors.”

Her father, Frank Palma, Smithtown Distribution Center Manager at Coca-Cola Refreshments, added: “Listening to these extremely successful professional women tell the stories of their journey in the workplace as women, while sitting at a table next to my own daughter who is beginning her career as an attorney, was a unique and eye-opening experience. I take pride in noting that Coca-Cola is ahead of the curve on the issues we heard from the panel, on everything from ‘Mommy Rooms’ to parental leave. I’m confident that the business leaders who attended this panel learned a great deal about how to attract and retain talent in their own organizations.”

As the event drew to a close, Malafi noted that the panel’s advice and experiences can apply to anyone passionate about their career, not only women. “I hope that in ten years, we don’t have a need for this type of event.”

Join us at our next Executive Breakfast on January 20th, at HIA-LI’s Annual Meeting and Legislative Breakfast. Learn more at www.hia-li.org