



A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN

GROWTH OF WOMEN-LED BUSI-
NESSES IN ORLANDO AMONG TOP IN
THE NATION.

By Jackie Kelvington

»» Madonna, Geena Davis and Rosie O'Donnell. If you remember the hit movie *A League of Their Own*, you recall them portraying the key players in a women's baseball league that was formed when the World War II draft threatened to shut down Major League Baseball. And you remember the characters they played for their talent, determination, spirit and accomplishments.

Present-day Orlando has become home to a league of its own, with a growing number of all-star players whose back-of-jerseys include the names: Crofton, Waltz, Sonntag, Weeden, Seay, Nodarse, Engfer, Schirm, Hostetter, Beeson, Mollaghasemi, Ruiz, Mitchell, McCall, Dominguez, Costa, Booker and Koenig, to name a few. These women, who own or lead their respective organizations, have not only generated individual success, but have helped their home team of Metro Orlando move into the ranks of the big leagues.

The region has seen a rapid rise in the number of women-owned businesses with more than 71,000 privately held (50 percent or more woman-owned) firms as of 2004, according to the Center for Women's Business Research. That's a 29 percent increase since 1997, earning Orlando a number 10 spot among the leading U.S. metro areas for growth in the number of privately held, women-owned firms. Most recent data shows that these Orlando businesses generated \$18 billion in sales and employed nearly 100,000 people.

Orlando's women business leaders own or oversee companies that range from Walt Disney World to the primary local newspapers; technology, construction and engineering firms; and a host of professional service firms, including commercial real estate, public relations, banking and

legal services. On top of that, a quick look through our region's top-ranked lists reveals that half of the chambers of commerce, non-profit service organizations and top credit unions are all led by women.

What's spurred this growth? The answers are as diverse as the women business leaders here. Many cite the region's strong entrepreneurial spirit, economic strength and sheer growth. Others say it's a great place to raise a family and become ingrained in the community.

"Since I moved to Orlando from Philadelphia twenty-four years ago, I have always felt that the region was ideal for entrepreneurs," says Linda Costa, president and creative director of Costa DeVault.

Founded by Costa in 1985, the company has become one of Central Florida's most prominent marketing communications, public relations and graphic design firms.

"The climate is business-friendly and full of opportunity, with plenty of venues for networking and business development," continues Costa. "The majority of decision-makers are involved in the community, approachable and accessible. It's a great environment to build and foster relationships."

Metro Orlando also has a competitive edge when it comes to resources for women in business. The region has an abundance of national, state, local and industry-specific association chapters that connect women business leaders, offer professional development and help them grow their businesses. These include: the National Association of Women Business Owners, Executive Women International, the Orlando Business Professional Women's Association, the Ya Ya Network, Florida Executive Women, the Florida Association of Women Lawyers, Commercial Real Estate Women and the Hispanic American Professional Business Women Association.

The Orlando office of national law firm Holland & Knight started a

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(locally founded communications marketing firm)*

Women's Initiative program, through which the firm hosts regular forums for women business leaders in the area. Orange County government launched an annual Women's Leadership Summit that offers day-long programs and seminars on professional development, balancing work-family and more. All this on top of the fact that Orlando is home to several noted organizations that help nurture entrepreneurs, including the Disney/SBA National Entrepreneur Center and the University of Central Florida's Small Business Center and its Technology Incubator.

"Metro Orlando's 'can do' attitude is what sets it apart," says Joanie Schirm,

president of Geotechnical and Environmental Consultants, Inc. "Central Florida is an increasingly dynamic and welcoming marketplace. The velocity of change over the past three to five years is a phenomenon that most communities would wish for in ten years,"

Schirm founded GEC in 1991. Her company has since become a leading engineering and environmental consulting firm known for major community-shaping projects.

"The Burnham Institute's choice of Orlando, the new University of Central Florida Medical School, and our community's investment in a new Performing Arts Center, events center/arena,

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and a renovated Florida Citrus Bowl are just of a few of the major happenings that underscore a community on the

move," comments Schirm.

Here is what some of Orlando's other "league" members had to say:



"Central Florida is one of the **largest centers in the world for modeling and simulation**. That's been critical to our success, and so have our ties to the University of Central Florida, which is now the sixth largest university in the country. UCF provides us an extensive and growing knowledge base which has contributed greatly to the company's human capital and our competitive advantage."

Mansooreh Mollaghasemi, president of Productivity Apex, a locally founded company that uses technology and process-improvement tools to increase productivity and efficiency in organizations



"There are many things that make Orlando a great place. What I most admire is that our civic and **business leaders all share a common goal — a vision for a great city**. I'm excited about where this city and region are headed and proud that Disney is a leader in this

great community."

Meg Crofton, president, Walt Disney World Resort



"Metro Orlando is an ideal place for women-led businesses to thrive and flourish. Our region is relatively young, progressive and diverse when compared to older established areas with entrenched non-women-led businesses. Here, there is a **culture of encouragement, acceptance and support for women in leadership positions throughout our community**."

Leila Nodarse, president & CEO of locally founded engineering consulting firm Nodarse & Associates, Inc.



"Orlando is a great business location for SAIC because of the synergies among the military services (our customers), the business community and the University of Central Florida, which all work together to generate success in the high tech domain. What I like best about the region is that here, more than anywhere I have lived, **there is a sense of community**. There are so many great people living here — people who are willing to get together and help each other, both on a business and on a personal level."

Beverly Seay, senior vice president, Business Unit General Manager, SAIC (Science Applications International Corporation, a leading provider of scientific, engineering, systems integration and technical services and solutions to all branches of the U.S. military)

