

# Created by women, for women ~ The Northbay Alliance of Professional Women



By Stephanie Derammelaere

In 2007 several local female business professionals – some who worked for companies and some who were entrepreneurs, got together to form the Northbay Alliance of Professional Women. Since then, the Rohnert Park-based organization has grown to approximately 50 members, has become a non-profit, started another chapter in Mendocino County and is furthering their mission to connect women through networking so they can achieve their professional goals.

“Because it was 2007 things were pretty difficult in the economic landscape,” says Michelle Martin, President of the Northbay Alliance of Professional Women. “As a female entrepreneur, it really felt like we needed to gather our resources and create a community to move through this and build successful, thriving businesses. It was a small group in the beginning - five to seven of us – that decided we had to band together because we are stronger as a unit than we are individually.”

Knowing that as busy, professional women they had limited time and flexibility, they decided to meet once a month for an hour and a half luncheon to empower, learn from and encourage each other. Today, the group still meets every third Wednesday of the month at 11:30 a.m. at the Clubhouse at Redwood Creek on 600 Rohnert Park Expressway West.

Much more than just another networking group however, the organization aims to support and showcase their members in a positive networking environment, share their collective knowledge and resources, unite to create a stronger community, recognize achievement and educate themselves on business and leadership growth fundamentals. Topics discussed do not just cover business-related issues, but can range from a variety of topics many women have to deal with such as parenting, aging parents, shifting roles and workforce transitions.

“In traditional networking groups I’ve seen relationships built and people broadcasting their business, but I haven’t really seen that particular development of the individual, that driven person who just wants to get better every day,” says Martin. “That was something I hadn’t seen in the landscape of what you call traditional networking. We really wanted to be different. We wanted a place where we could grow and learn and we could always know that value would be delivered.”

And yes, NAPW does also encourage strong referral relationships to increase the income and profits of their members. However, unlike other networking groups, membership is not limited to one member per industry. The group's mentality comes from a place of abundance, not lack.

“That was another thing we wanted to be sure was different,” says Martin. “We believe in an abundance mindset versus scarcity. There's a lot of networking groups that are very fearful that leads will go in the wrong direction or that there won't be enough for the members, and they're very quota driven and they're very limited on who can participate. With NAPW we absolutely do not believe in that approach. We think there is enough room in the world for everyone and if they want to come in and synergize and grow with us, and are going to be a positive influence and help us learn new things, we 100 percent want to welcome them.”

Besides the monthly meetings, NAPW also hosts “Ladies in Leadership,” a symposium of women-created companies, generally held twice a year. These events provide women of all industries and backgrounds with an opportunity to gather together and hear from a panel of four to five powerful and inspirational female leaders. These sessions focus heavily on leadership skill development and developing meaningful business connections.

Their most recent event, titled “Grit & Gumption – Gearing up for Change,” was held on April 26, 2018 and featured a panel of female leaders addressing a variety of pressing issues facing women in business today. Some of the topics included establishing an online presence, increasing financial health, and being an effective leader.

“One of the speakers spoke about social media and your presence, getting your message across and determining your intention,” says Martin. “We had another person who spoke specifically about justifying your value – what you

deliver to the marketplace and what your true value is and how you communicate that to yourself and the public. We had a great speaker talking about taking initiative on self care and that it's ok to not have all the answers but it's not ok to suffer. It's important that you find the wisdom, that you seek good counsel, and that you surround yourself with positive people and don't beat yourself up if you make a mistake. That's important for people to hear because we're very perfection oriented and we think that we have to be perfect to be successful. That's not even a real possibility – there is no perfect.”

Currently, the organization is managed not only by Martin but also a board of directors, including Sharon Bricker-Ferris, Kathleen Coghlan, Jennifer Kruss, Monica Moura, Tatjana Janga and Ann Moreno.

“We have the most extraordinary board of directors in the universe,” says Martin. “We would not have the structure, the bandwidth, or the positivity if we didn't have the most amazing board members.”

Another unique feature of NAPW is that the organization contributes financially to a variety of other local community organizations, through a percentage of the bi-annual \$60 dues that each member pays. Some of the non-profit organizations NAPW has donated money to include AMVETS, the Alzheimer's Association, the Boys & Girls Club of Rohnert Park, the Rotary Club of Rohnert Park – Cotati and COTS, as well as many others.

“The way we built our bi-laws is that, any membership or renewal monies that come into NAPW during a six-month period, we have taken 12.5 percent of those monies and already dedicated them to a local non-profit,” says Martin. “We're already prepositioned to give back to another non-profit. It's part of the bi-laws and has always been that way. The current non-profit we're sponsoring is a local non-profit called Lilliput. They are a foster and

kinship care agency in Sonoma County that helps find foster homes or helps children that have been separated from their families be reunited.”

Professional women interested in NAPW are encouraged to attend a monthly meeting to determine if the group is a good fit for them. The organization allows visitors to attend two complimentary NAPW meetings before asking them to make a decision about becoming a member. In addition, any questions can be directed to Michelle Martin at 707-217-9994 or to Sharon Bricker-Ferris at 707-799-6111 or by checking their website, [www.ladiesprofessionalalliance.com](http://www.ladiesprofessionalalliance.com).