

GIVING BACK

□ Saskatoon women share success through mentoring

By Jeannie Armstrong
for Saskatoon Business

Behind every successful woman is a mentor, says Betty-Ann Heggie.

She experienced the value of mentorship herself as she rose through the ranks during her 26-year career with Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan Inc. Appointed senior vice-president, Heggie blazed a trail as one of the first female executives in the potash industry.

“When I was in the company, I did a lot of mentoring and it always gave me satisfaction,” says Heggie.

“After retiring in 2006, I wanted to find something that was going to give me meaning. I remembered how difficult it had been for me in the early years. There were hardly any women working in the industry. I wanted to give back in a way that I thought was meaningful.”

After leaving PotashCorp, Heggie reinvented herself as the “Stiletto Chick” — a globe-trotting motivational speaker, author and mentor.

“Mentorship is very special to me. I have a really strong belief that we need more women in business, we need more women at the decision-making table — in government, in business, in non-governmental agencies, on foundations,” she said.

Women approach life, and business, differently than men, something Heggie refers to as “gender physics.” Gender attitudes are shaped in early

childhood, says Heggie. Boys are used to the structured play of sports where coaches and captains take the lead.

“Everyone knows their place and accepts it. Everyone supports the coach and captain. If you have a problem with another guy, you get over it and get back on the field.”

Girls are different, she says.

“Girls play equally. They’ll come to a consensus together over what their dollars are going to do today. If there’s a disagreement, they’ll put the dolls away, because the relationship is more important.”

The corporate world is based on a patriarchal system, “designed by men, for men,” says Heggie. “It’s a system that’s foreign to women. Because we’re more relationship oriented, I believe that we need mentors to help us through the system.”

Proof of this comes from statistics indicating female students in high school and university have higher marks than male counterparts. “Because the girls get the best marks at university, they get the highest starting salaries. They have this head start. Within two years, the research shows, the males have surpassed the females in salaries. Within five years, the males are being made partners and the females are dropping out,” says Heggie.

“Education is part of the answer, but still women are not advancing in the corporate world. The answer is mentorship.”

Named into Canada’s Top 100 Most Powerful Women Hall of Fame, Heggie participated in their national mentorship program.

In demand as a motivational speaker, Heggie used the opportunity to advocate the importance of mentorship on a local level. “I would encourage other business leaders to mentor young women. I began receiving phone calls from executives asking me if I would mentor young women in their organizations,” says Heggie. □



— SB Photo by Gord Waldner

Betty-Ann Heggie blazed trails to become a senior vice-president with PotashCorp, appreciative of the mentoring which helped advance her career

Betty-Ann Heggie mentors two protégées at a recent Womentorship networking event, at the University of Saskatchewan Edwards School of Business



“I quickly realized I couldn’t adopt the world. I didn’t have time to mentor everyone myself. I offered to help find mentors for these young women. I’d think about who would be a good match among the successful women I knew. It was like a matchmaking service.”

Soon she had too many requests for mentors. “I approached the Edwards School of Business at the University of Saskatchewan and said, ‘Would you consider running a mentorship program for women? I’ll pay for it if you’ll administer it.’”

The Betty-Ann Heggie Womentorship Program was launched in September, 2009. Rachele Brockman, assistant professor at the Edwards School of Business, works closely with Heggie on the project.

Dr. Daphne Taras, dean of the Edwards School of Business, says, “To my knowledge, Betty-Ann has innovated something that is really targeted at women. The matching of the protégées and mentors is really a lovely aspect of the program.”

The matchmaking process involves looking for mentors whose experiences, skills and abilities best align with the protégées’ career focus and ambitions.

“It’s a networking program as well. The protégées make a lot of contacts that will continue to benefit them after the program is over,” says Heggie.

Mentors and protégées meet once every quarter, for one hour. The Womentorship program also holds a series of professional development workshops and seminars throughout the year, focusing on a variety of topics — from personality profiling to acquiring negotiation skills.

“It’s really rewarding to see how the women come together and support each other. They are so open in their discussions about the issues they face and how to address those issues,” says Heggie.

The Womentorship program pairs University of Saskatchewan alumni with Saskatoon women who have achieved success in their business or profession.

“I was very touched by how many senior women in this community were willing to give their

Taras says, “The program offers the protégées a chance to have women who have weathered a lot of storms give very frank, useful advice, and possibly to open their eyes to new ways of solving things. With maturity comes a broader tool kit of ways of solving problems that many not be so obvious to the younger women. There’s a lot of respect in those mentorship pairings. On the mentor’s part, there’s a real desire to give back, to help women struggle less than they themselves may have struggled.”

In the program’s second year, 23 protégées have been matched with mentors in their fields, including business, engineering/science, law, health care, arts and education.

This year, Heggie partnered

time as mentors,” says Heggie.

In selecting protégées, Heggie was interested in diversity. “I didn’t want a group made up entirely of business graduates. We need women from all different colleges. The only criteria was that they be graduates of the Univer-

sity of Saskatchewan.”

Initially, Heggie and Brockman had planned to start with 10 or 12 mentor-protégée matches. “The response to the program was so overwhelming that we ended up with 23 matches in the program’s first year,” says Heggie. ➡

with the Edwards School of Business to expand the program to include women in Afghanistan.

While speaking at a world peace conference in Italy during the summer of 2009, Heggie shared the podium with Sakena Yacoobi, an Afghan woman who risked her life to start 80 secret schools for girls. After the defeat of the Taliban, she formed an organization called the Afghan Institute of Learning, which operates schools and medical institutions in 20 Afghan provinces.

“After the program, Sakena asked if I would mentor some of the master teachers from her schools in Afghanistan,” says Heggie.

Heggie was so moved by Yacoobi’s courage and determination she decided to contribute all of the money she received for giving speeches towards airfare for the Afghan protégées.

She approached the Edwards School of Business to set up a special mentorship program for the Afghan women.

Shelley Brown, managing

partner of Deloitte Saskatchewan, invited Sakena Yacoobi to speak at the firm’s annual Leadership Initiative Spring Breakfast, not just in Saskatoon, but also in Regina and Toronto. Proceeds from all three events were donated to the Womentorship Fund for Afghan Women.

“We’ve now raised enough money to bring the women from Afghanistan to Canada,” says Heggie.

A three-week program has been developed for the Afghan protégées, with a focus on innovative education, healthcare and entrepreneurship programs in Saskatoon.

With the funding and programming in place, Heggie’s efforts are now focused on helping the Afghan women obtain their travel visas to Canada.

“Betty-Ann is a remarkable woman,” says Taras. “She is the embodiment of generosity through mentorship. She really believes that women can help women achieve success.” ■