

Women at the top



Part of a series
about women
managers on the
Northern Plains

Staff Report



Pat Berger — President and CEO, United Way of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks & Area (Grand Forks, ND, 4 employees), 14 years with United Way/all in same position, B.A. in Communications from Marietta College (OH).

How would you describe your job and what you do on a daily basis? It is never boring. It can be doing many things. I spend a lot of my day talking to people, which means I sometimes spend evenings and weekends catching up on my writing. I do a lot of e-mail. What did we ever do without email? I need to have a good sense of what is happening in the community. I need to be out there talking to people. There are never enough hours in the day.

How did you become president and CEO of a nonprofit? I started in public broadcasting at WQED in Pittsburgh, PA. I worked at radio stations. A big part of public broadcasting is fundraising. I got into the fundraising part and it just kind of took off from there. When I was living in the New York City area I was the executive director of the chamber of commerce of Ossining, NY for about 10 years. Ossining is about 30 miles north of Manhattan and home to Sing Sing prison. My husband took a position as professor of history at UND, which is why we live here. Living out my career in North Dakota was not on my radar screen when I was in my twenties. But my husband and I are very happy living here.

What is rewarding about working for a nonprofit and helping others in your community? You are helping not only individuals who need help, but in the case of United Way you are working on community-wide issues. You can see how your work is helping the community. It's a very close relationship.

Do you have any particularly heartwarming stories from your 14 years at the United Way? I was here during the flood. For me personally and professionally, the flood was an amazing part of the chapter of the United Way. It sort of put us on the map. We grew out of that experience. Through that I got to work with United Way leaders throughout the country. I was part of the first class out of 24 selected out of a field of 400 for a United Way leadership program. When Katrina hit I was asked to be part of a national United Way task force.

What advice would you offer to younger women in the workplace? The nonprofit sector is one where women can advance and be successful. It is certainly not the sector to be in if the rewards you are looking for are solely monetary. But I find the reward that I get from what I am doing makes me feel that I am making a difference. I think if you feel that way, you will be successful.



Marianne Von Seggern — Vice President of Strategic Development, Bell Inc. (Sioux Falls, SD, 215 employees), 19 years with Bell/3 years in current position, B.S. in Business Administration from University of South Dakota (Vermillion).

How did you rise to become a vice president? I have participated in and managed all aspects of our business. I started out in account management, customer service and sales service. I had opportunities in marketing and administration management, and then I was general manager for five years. I had a significant amount of experience and I really took the time to learn the business. I had an excellent mentor in our president and CEO, Mark Graham. He recognized my abilities to manage and lead through projects I had been involved in. He taught me a lot about manufacturing and the packaging industry.

What obstacles did you overcome to get to where you are? Paperboard packaging manufacturing is very technical in nature. The paperboard packaging industry is male dominated. Up until the last few years there were very few women in management and leadership roles. I had to listen and learn about management and operations. I had to ask the right questions and make plans, delegate and plan accordingly.

What do you like about your job? I like working with people, planning, implementing and having successful outcomes. I like having an overview of the organization and working to ensure long-term viability for our company and making sure our customers are happy.

What would most people be surprised to learn about the packaging industry? I don't think most people when they walk through the aisles of the grocery store realize how a retail package is made. We start out with very large rolls of paper. Each roll weighs about 2,000 pounds. We put that large roll into the feed end of a printing press system. At high speed we print and die cut that web into individual packages that come out the other end. All those millions and billions of packages start out in rolls. Then we put it on another piece of equipment to fold it and glue it, they go into corrugated cases, onto pallets and then it's shipped to the customer. They take it and fill it with their product.

What advice would you offer to younger women in the workplace? First you need to believe in yourself, your knowledge and skills. You need to show that confidence and your knowledge of the organization to others in the workplace. You need to be in a constant mode of learning. Get involved in cross-functional projects. My philosophy is when you get an opportunity to lead, try to lead by example. Demonstrate you are part of the team and are willing to roll up your sleeves and go to work.



Jana Berndt — President/market manager, Bremer Bank (Breckenridge, MN-Wahpeton, ND, market, 25 employees), 24 years with Bremer/8 years in position, B.A. in Business Administration from Concordia College (Moorhead, MN)/Graduate School of Bank Marketing (Boulder, CO).

What was it like being the first female bank president at a Bremer location? It wasn't a big issue being the first female president, although banking management positions are typically dominated by men. There are times that being female has been an issue, but nothing I couldn't handle.

How unique is it to be a female bank president? In a room full of bank managers and leaders, there aren't a lot of women there. When I attend a meeting where community leaders are gathered, there are usually more men in the room than women. In our part of the country, banking has been dominated by males in leadership roles. At times it's an obstacle because of the gender balance, but I'm not uncomfortable about it and have learned to deal with it.

How did you rise to become a bank president? When I was growing up my dad was a bank president in Crookston, MN. I kind of grew up with banking in my blood. When I was in college I worked for a bank in Moorhead. Then an opportunity arose down in Breckenridge with their customer service department. It was a new job that had been created to help clients. I have worked in marketing, human resources, lending and teller supervision. In 1995 I had the opportunity to help start a new bank in the Fergus Falls grocery store. We also started a new bank in Wahpeton, when I was retail manager. In 2000 we went through restructuring, and the bank president moved to another location, so I was promoted to president.

What was it like growing up with a bank president as a father? My first job at a bank was mowing the yard and planting flowers at the Crookston bank. The first time I mowed the yard, I got reprimanded by my dad, the bank president, when I cut the corner of the boulevard. There was a little mound there and I didn't do it right. I always joke with my dad that it was my first reprimand from a manager. But my father was a great role model and taught me a lot about holding this position.

What obstacles did you overcome to get to where you are? One of the things that followed me in my early years was that my father was a bank president. It took me a few years to get past the questions of, 'Did she get the job because she was qualified or because her dad is a bank president?' I got past it, but I had some proving to do.

What advice would you offer to younger women in the workplace? You can do it all. You can accomplish a career, a family and a healthy community. But there's a certain amount of balance involved. I have found myself volunteering and being a part of the community in areas that my family can participate in.