

A Woman of Design

Pauline Larsen interviews TCREW 2007 President Carolyn Laidley Arn

Staying true to the Toronto CREW mission is the key to making a good association great, says 2007 Toronto CREW President Carolyn Laidley Arn. It's something that she intends to do by spotlighting the organization's members, sponsors and programmes – what she terms the “three legs of the stool”.

“These three legs are our *raison d’etre*, and we must ensure that they are solid,” she explains.

And she's not afraid to empower the organization's leadership to think outside the box in an effort to continually refine and streamline the various committee programs - if that's what stakeholders want. She talks passionately about staying member-focused, data-driven and keeping flexible.

“We have to know what programs fit with our mission,” she adds. “And become the go-to organization for member expertise and events.”

An interior designer by profession, Laidley Arn left her childhood home in Ontario's 1,000 Islands to study at the University of Manitoba. Job prospects brought her to Toronto in the mid-eighties and she practised in her field for the next eight years with Benitz & Benitz Design Consultants, handling projects that ranged from the small-scale to those in excess of 250,000 square feet.

“Design is a wonderful field and I enjoyed tremendous opportunities. But after the birth of my daughter, I was ready for new challenges,” she says.

She turned her professional experience to good use by joining Interior Dimensions, a construction firm that was looking for someone who understood the client's point of view.

Laidley Arn quickly advanced to become the company's primary rainmaker and was instrumental in developing the ‘client first’ ethos for which the organization has become known.

“The position combines all the things I love most about the fields of construction and design: building relationships, managing early-stage project challenges, and the construction process itself,” she elaborates.

Like so many Toronto CREW members, Laidley-Arn was drawn to the organization because of the diversity of professions and members within the real estate industry that it represented. Her first experience was when a friend invited her to a panel session on development in 2001.

“I met a number of incredibly interesting people, and decided that I must become a member right away,” she says.

In the first year, she joined the programme committee. The next year, she was appointed Director of PR for the Board.

“The organization was in its early stages at that time and I was told that my roles and responsibilities wouldn’t be too taxing. I’d simply have to create sponsor display boards, take them to the meetings, put them up on the easel and then take them back to my office,” she laughs.

In 2004, Laidley Arn accepted the challenging role as co-chair of the Marketing and PR committee for the CREW Convention, which was held outside of the US for the first time.

It was a time when much was being written in the media about the lack of women in senior management positions and the glass ceiling for women executives. Toronto CREW captured the imagination of the press, says Laidley Arn.

Over the past six years, she’s witnessed the consistent growth and evolution of a dynamic organization. Membership in 2006 surpassed 180; sponsorship exceeded the \$60,000 mark in 2005 and 2006. The annual charity golf day held by Toronto CREW raised over \$100,000 last year and there’s more active member involvement than ever before.

“In 2006 alone, the association launched a scholarship program and awarded three scholarships to young women in their final year of real estate studies,” she says. “We also hosted sixty grade 11 girls at a highly successful CREW Careers Day.”

2007 kicked off with Toronto CREW’s mentorship program, with more than forty women already on board.

Today, her honed networking, problem-solving, team leadership and strategic planning skills will all be put to good use in her role as Toronto CREW President in 2007.

Despite her Toronto CREW commitments, Laidley Arn looks set to keep contributing to the industry in other ways, like the guest lecturing that she does annually at Ryerson University, or feature articles in *Property Management* magazine. She has also spoken at IFMA events and the IIDEX/Neocon conference.

And she’ll be keeping Friday nights free for her weekly English riding session with her 14-year old daughter Stephanie.

“It’s the one time that I can’t think about the pressures of work, because it’s too important to focus on the horse,” she laughs.

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