



Heroines: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

It is a quarter of a century since the Women's Business Ownership Act was passed. It didn't happen suddenly, it happened because a group of twelve pioneering women business owners in Washington DC began meeting informally in the 1970s to discuss their difficulty in getting federal contracts, and expanded to a vision that would result in the Women's Business Ownership Act (HR5050) in 1988. These women, and that Act changed the focus, forever, of the role women business owners would play in shaping public policy, as well as their impact in our national economy.

As a result of the effort of these women, a movement was begun to drive change, and it resulted in the birth of NAWBO, the National Association of Women Business Owners, which incorporated in 1975. These amazing twelve women identified allies in Congress from both parties, in the Executive Branch, and in the SBA, and sought to debunk myths, and the many misconceptions our government representatives had about women-owned businesses. Because of them, no longer would women business owners be solely categorized as crafters, a grave misperception which prevented them from being taken seriously by policy makers and the media.

They knew that research was critical to the effort, and in fact the research demonstrated that a significant percentage generated more than a million dollars a year in sales and owned significant companies. This research was the catalyst for a commitment to powerful data and statistics and provided the ammunition needed to develop policy recommendations for government action.

And so began the road to national political activism, centered around a vision which resulted in supportive language about women's entrepreneurship in both the Democratic and Republican party platforms in 1984, and then, a political awakening at the 1986 White House Conference on Small Business. There were so many heroes throughout this movement as well as during the White House Conference on Small Business. Among them were Virginia Littlejohn, Gillian Rudd, Laura Henderson, Olive Rosen, Charlotte Taylor, Susan Hager, Hope Eastman, Susan Winer, Susan Chaires, and so many, many more. They worked tirelessly to train, to develop forward-looking policy recommendations (which were published as "*Framework for the Future*") and to build state delegations and coalitions. Terry Neese and I, co-founders of WIPP, circled the country to train and introduce the importance of advocacy for public policies that impacted their businesses. My company, Voice-Tel, provided the technology that connected women, provided briefings and updates and kept us inspired. NAWBO captured 12% of the delegates, more than the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Business

and managed to get 15 of our members elected as chairs or co-chairs of their state delegations. NAWBO got 26 of its 27 issues adopted!

Emboldened with our successes at the 1986 White House Conference, it was clear that we were able to influence policies to address gaps. NAWBO's President, Gillian Rudd, spoke with Congressman John LaFalce (D-NY) Chair of the House Small Business Committee and requested that hearings be held on women's entrepreneurship – the answer was yes. Four major gaps were identified to focus on, witnesses for the hearings were identified and trained, Congressional allies and champions identified (Congresswoman Lindy Boggs (D-LA) and Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R-KS). Hope Eastman assisted in drafting legislative language and a grassroots network around the country was established to lobby for House Resolution (HR 5050) through to passage.

HR 5050, P.L. 100-533, was passed, and President Reagan signed it into law on October 25, 1988, to address the needs of women in business by giving women entrepreneurs recognition and resources, and by eliminating discriminatory lending practices by banks that favored male business owners, and has had considerable impact. Legislative changes can be found at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d100:HR05050:@@D&summ2=m&>. HR 5050 has had a profound impact for tens of thousands of women business owners, and for me, and it has been a catalyst for the establishment of WIPP.

There are more players in our ecosystem today, women leaders who have emerged and who have joined forces to continue to address specific needs, and who are working to plan for our path forward. The road ahead looks promising, with the development of *The Roadmap to 2020: Fueling the Growth of Women's Enterprise Development*, led by Virginia Littlejohn.

We will celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of HR 5050 together, celebrate its achievements and look ahead to our fiftieth in 2038. My thanks to my dear friend Virginia Littlejohn, a brilliant thinker and influencer, who was a significant force and voice in HR 5050 and who provided much of this history, to NAWBO and its extraordinary leadership and vision who brought us here today and to all the amazing and courageous women who have made it all possible, all heroines for yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We have more to do, but thanks to them, we are on firm footing.