

Forty years later, in #MeToo era, Philly women's group seeks to empower

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FORUM OF EXECUTIVE WOMEN

Members of the Forum of Executive Women line up for a group photo in the 1980s. Forum officials couldn't identify all the women, but among the six women in the front row are Donna Brennan, Stephanie Naidoff, and Linda McAleer. Among the four Forum members in the back row are Rosemary Greco and Jane Pepper.



by **Jane M. Von Bergen**, Staff
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Forty years ago, Judith von Seldeneck made a luncheon reservation for 60 in her husband's name at the Philadelphia Racquet Club — then a strictly all-male gathering spot.

Boy, were they surprised when dozens of women arrived for lunch.

"I'm sure they were all rolling their eyes," von Seldeneck recalled. "But they were very gracious."

That was the start of the Forum of Executive Women, celebrating its 40th anniversary Thursday at the Please Touch Museum.

Forty years ago, she and cofounder Lee van de Velde said, Forum members never talked about the kind of sexual-harassment cases in the news today, even though they met monthly and developed deep friendships. Both said they had never experienced it themselves. "I've flirted and been flirted with," von Seldeneck said, "but I never had anyone make an inappropriate pass."

Complaining was probably useless, she said. "Nobody could do anything about it. People were afraid to speak up because they were afraid they'd lose their jobs. And they probably would have. So, they shrugged and soldiered on.

"It's taken a tsunami where, finally, women are feeling safe enough to talk about it. I think there's a real opportunity now. It's on everybody's mind and things are starting to happen to these folks, like consequences," she said. "If all this starts to hurt the bottom line, believe me, that will get the attention of management and boards of directors."

Over the years, the topic came up more frequently, said Sally Stetson, a former Forum president and a founding partner at Salveson Stetson, an executive search company in Radnor. "I think the Forum can make a difference, as a safe place for women to have very personal discussions."



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Lawyer Margaret McCausland leads the Forum of Executive Women, celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2017.

Stetson said she experienced harassment as a young professional when her boss' boss developed a crush on her and followed her around like a puppy — so much so that it embarrassed her and her coworkers laughed about it. She complained to her boss and human resources. They listened, but advised her to confront the man directly. “I felt supported because they listened, but I didn’t like the advice.”

She gathered her courage and told the executive his behavior was embarrassing both of them and had to stop. “He was so embarrassed. He apologized and backed off,” she said.

Stetson said she thinks the Forum should consider a program that would ask members: “What happened to you and how did you handle it? How do you wish you had handled it?”

In 1977, von Seldeneck and van de Velde, then her business partner, assembled the women at the Racquet Club as a way to build a talent pool for their recruitment agency, Distaffers, which specialized in recruiting women for executive positions in for-profit companies looking to diversify their leadership teams.

“We had that lunch and it was like magic,” recalled von Seldeneck, who now leads Diversified Search, a Philadelphia-based executive head-hunting company.

The Forum now numbers 450, runs a mentoring program for young women executives, and publishes an annual report detailing the number of women

serving as executives or on the boards of Philadelphia's largest publicly traded companies, as well as on boards and in leadership in the region's largest nonprofits.

And that's the point, says the Forum's current president, employment lawyer Margaret "Peggy" McCausland.

"Primarily, our focus is trying to get more women in positions of leadership," she said. "If we can accomplish that, much of what we are seeing would take care of itself."