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Women in Business 2009: Construction: Keeping the earth in mind while managing a dozen construction enterprises

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SANTA ROSA – “We’re stewards of this earth. How can we make this a better place?”

Those words may seem more apt from an environmental activist than a top Sonoma County quarry operator and real estate developer, but they help explain Marlene Soiland’s influence on “greening” the local construction industry and her leadership in the family businesses.

Ms. Soiland, 53, is president and chief executive officer of Soiland Management Co., which administers and handles finances for a dozen construction-related family partnerships, companies and corporations. Those include Stony Point Rock Quarry, Soils Plus, the 100-acre Northwest Regional Industrial Park near the Sonoma County airport, Shiloh Associates – which developed a 2,700-acre residential community north of Santa Rosa – and about \$20 million worth of commercial and residential properties.

Ms. Soiland has been a trendsetter of environmental stewardship in local construction, according to Doug Hamilton, president of general engineering contractor Oak Grove Construction of Santa Rosa. He first met her in 1981 when her father, notable Sonoma County construction and real estate development figure Marv Soiland, recruited him from California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo after graduation with a construction management degree.

“Other construction companies have honestly done it with a gun to their head, and many have become certified because it is financially advantageous,” he said. “She felt it was the right thing to do from the beginning.”

Women have an important role to play in the changes increased environment-mindedness is bringing to not only construction and business but society as a whole, according to Ms. Soiland.

“It is not business versus the environment, right versus left or men versus women anymore,” she said. “Women ... can help bring people together.”

Understanding people in addition to equipment and materials helped her career gravitate toward financial and project management. Like all of Mr. Soiland’s seven children, Ms. Soiland started her career at age 13, learning to work harder, longer and for less pay than employees who weren’t siblings.

Upon graduation from Cal Poly in 1978, she rejoined the family business as it was returning from Novato, where Mr. Soiland had developed Ygnacio Industrial Park, to her hometown of Santa Rosa. He had purchased a prune orchard that would later become Northwest Regional to have a construction yard and gravel plant. The property had many areas of soft soil that were being filled with river gravel.

“I would be working in the office, and they would call me on the CB to get out there and pull some equipment out of a hole,” she recalled. “I’m not a great equipment operator, but I understand the human side of the business.”

That would become important as the company started transitioning from the underground utilities contractor that Soiland Co. started as in Novato in 1962. The rock quarry was acquired in 1973 as Sonoma

County politics was shifting against river gravel mining, picking up speed with the adoption of the Sonoma County Aggregate Resources Plan in the mid-1980s. Soiland sold Healdsburg Sand & Gravel to Syar Industries and started securing entitlements for Northwest Regional and the 2,700-acre Shiloh home development.

In 1989, she became chief financial officer of the quarry and started looking at reorganizing the family pursuits. That culminated with the formation of Soiland Management in 1992.

Ms. Soiland's relational skills came to bear in the mid-1990s. Up to that point, she had been content being No. 2, but suddenly she found herself becoming a "bridge" between family members to honor her father's interest in continuing to run the business while preparing for the next generation of leadership.

"I was shocked in 1997 that I could be a leader," she recalled. "I realized I was 40 years old, and people would care what I said."

Her passion for family business and the environment led to other advisory roles. Since 1997, she's been an outside director for Exchange Bank. She helped start the Sonoma County chapter of the California Construction and Industrial Materials Association in 1995 to give a voice to the local aggregate-rock industry. Ms. Soiland sits on the Institute for Family Business Advisory Council and the Sonoma County Alliance's Environmental Committee. She's also co-chair of the Sonoma County Innovation Council's Economic Climate Action Committee seeking to keep jobs in the county.

Ms. Soiland has two sons, both of whom are interested in the construction business. Ross, 25, served two tours of duty with the U.S. Marine Corps in Iraq and in May graduated with high honors from Delta College. He is an apprentice at Peterson Tractor Co. near the Soiland offices.

Rex, 23, whom Ms. Soiland calls "her succession plan," is studying business at Chico State University. He worked at the quarry while earning his associate degree at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Ms. Soiland enjoys athletics, practicing yoga and Pilates, swimming, bicycling, running, hiking, kayaking and traveling. After participating last year in the Ironman 70.3 triathlon, formerly known as a Half Ironman, she has been training to complete the full version this August. She also participated in the Tahoe Sierra Century Ride bicycle trip around the lake.

Coincidentally, she and younger sister Monica Soiland came to a love of athletics independently.

"The girls were not encouraged to do sports," Marlene Soiland said. "I was a cheerleader in high school."

Monica Soiland is vice president for business development at Midstate Construction and receiver of last year's Women in Business award in the construction category. She had completed a 10,000-mile bike ride throughout North America and works out several times a week.

"My goal is to be in the best shape of my life," Marlene Soiland said.

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