

“I wanted to get out and see what’s going on”

A passion for a better life leads Elva Bankins to business world achievement

SEAN SCULLY

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Elva Bankins has always known what she wanted.

“I always saw myself, even as a teenager, carrying a briefcase and wearing a business suit. I always saw myself that way. I always wanted to be that.”

As an African-American woman in 1960s Baltimore, that dream seemed unrealistic.

“People would say to me, as a teenager, who do you know that would be that way ... And as a child growing up in Baltimore, I didn’t know anybody,” she said. “But I saw people in magazines doing it; I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t do it.”

Today she does it. Every day.

Bankins is the senior vice president and general manager in Philadelphia for Lee Hecht Harrison, a worldwide career development company. In that position, she helps counsel people who are changing careers — voluntarily or involuntarily — and helps companies create in-house leadership development programs.

Bankins’ determination and professionalism is a great asset to Philadelphia, said Liz Dow, president of Leadership Philadelphia, a nonprofit that works to connect private industry executives with community service organizations.

“She is unusually gifted at forging con-

nections between people,” Dow said. “She is always going above and beyond in every aspect of business.”

Bankins success today stems from a restless desire to find a better life.

It started with a job at Baltimore Gas & Electric, the big public utility in her hometown, a job that most people in her neighborhood envied.

“My family and friends thought I had ‘made it’ because I was working for this public utility. And I never felt that way. I always felt this can’t be the end. Here I am 24 years old and I’ve always wanted to get out of Baltimore and see what else was going on.”

She parlayed computer skills she learned at Baltimore Gas into a job as a software tech for a company in Virginia. But still she wanted more.

“I went to our national sales manager at the time and said I would love to get into sales. And he said no,” she said. “Technical people are not sales people.”

But she wouldn’t take no for an answer,

and after years of trying, she talked her way into becoming a sales representative.

That led her to found her own company in 1996, a consulting firm specializing in training people to sell large software applications. Then, however, something unexpected happened.

“As I was doing presentations and doing work, I was asked to do other presentations on selling yourself — how you market you,” she said.

More and more, she found herself consulting with people looking to find new jobs, or do a better job selling themselves to their superiors in their current companies.

“Some people from Lee Hecht Harrison were in the audience when I gave a presentation, and they said ‘You’d be great in our business, helping people learn how to sell themselves or market themselves ... you would be great as a career consultant,’” she said.

She had never even realized there was such a thing as a “career development” industry, but it turns out that her sales back-



Elva L. Bankins

UP CLOSE

NAME: Elva L. Bankins

AGE: 57

TITLE: Senior vice president/general manager

EMPLOYER: Lee Hecht Harrison

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Joined Lee Hecht Harrison in 2000 after running a sales consultancy for four years. Previously worked in sales for SAP America Inc.; sales and tech support for Applied Data Research Inc., and tech support for Baltimore Gas & Electric Co.

EDUCATION: B.A. in Organizational Management from Eastern College.

HOMETOWN: Baltimore

CURRENT HOME: Berwyn

ground made her a natural.

“Sales people have an inherent way of looking at the bright side of things and not thinking that a situation is not over and done,” she said, “but thinking that this is an opportunity to pursue something further.”

In 2000, she got a full-time job with Lee Hecht Harrison in career development. “I found that to be much more rewarding than information technology, than teaching people to sell computer software,” she said. “It was a nice transition to help people to learn how to market themselves.” ■

Janet Cunningham excelled in a man's world

SEAN SCULLY

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Ever since she was a little girl, Janet B. Cunningham has wanted to build things.

She would play with her brother's erector set. She would design and sew clothes. She would watch with interest as her father designed and built many of the monumental signs familiar to generations of Philadelphians, including the Liberty Bell at the old Veterans Stadium.

It seemed natural, therefore, that she would become an engineer. She went to Penn State University to learn how to design and build monumental water control projects and dams.

Just one problem, though.

"At the time nobody told me nobody's doing that any more," said Cunningham, who graduated in 1980, shortly after the great era of dam building ended.

So today, Cunningham has put her engineering skills to work in a different way, running a business that helps clients supervise large construction projects. Cunningham and her staff oversee all aspects of a large project to make sure the work is done right and comes in on budget and on time. Most such projects are for large public organizations, such as the Philadelphia school system and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

As head of her own concern, JBC Associates, Cunningham is one of just a handful of women in the top ranks of the engineering or the construction trades.

"Not that I ever had the idea I would have my own business someday," she said. "Probably nobody is more surprised about that than I am. But there was an opportunity and I decided to try it."

Cunningham runs a tight business and commands the respect of her male colleagues and competitors, said Judy Bernicker, an architect and the business development manager for JBC.

"She really holds her ground," Bernicker said. "She has always been very highly respected by her peers in the

industry."

Bernicker too grew up in the business, since her father was in construction. She's known Cunningham for years and only began working for her a few years ago. Watching a woman run a business in the male-dominated field, she said, "is just a really neat thing."

But Cunningham doesn't see herself so much as a woman in a man's world.

"I don't see it as a challenge at all," she said. "I never really thought about it, that I was any different ... I wasn't a woman engineer, I was an engineer like everybody else."

But she admits that at first some of her colleagues were skeptical.

"One guy took a look at me and said, 'Do you have any men in your office who know what they're doing,'" she said. "I didn't go ballistic on them I just kind of laughed and [said] 'Oh, you're pretty funny,' and we moved on. And to this day we still laugh about that. They're still a client of mine, and I still remind him of that."

Unlike many engineers, Cunningham does no design work. Instead, she is more on the managerial side, supervising the work of the contractor on a major project.

She learned that skill from her first job after a brief time in the Army Corps of Engineers. She got a job at the firm TJ Trauner Associates in Philadelphia, which specializes in providing ex-

pert testimony to companies involved in lawsuits.

"We would go back into all the documents and figure out what went wrong and whose fault it was," Cunningham said.

Her experience in doing such engineering "autopsies" helped her avoid problems on the projects she supervises today. She learned that many problems stem from poor scheduling and communication among contractors and subcontractors.

"You need good communication skills," she said. "Personalities play a big role in a project's success, being able to work with other's players, people at the firm, with the common goal of creating a successful project. You have to learn that through experience." ■



Janet B. Cunningham

UP CLOSE

NAME: Janet B. Cunningham

AGE: 46

TITLE: President

EMPLOYER: JBC Associates Inc.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Professional engineer registered in six states; founded JBC in 1988. Previously worked for the firm of TJ Trauner & Associates and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Also serves as an arbitrator, recognized by the American Arbitration Association.

EDUCATION: B.A. in civil engineering, Penn State University

HOMETOWN: Philadelphia

CURRENT HOME: Gulph Mills

“It looked glamorous and I wanted to try this”

Natalie Conner's journey in radio began with Mary Tyler Moore on TV

SEAN SCULLY

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Natalie Conner's journey to the top ranks of the radio world began with Mary Tyler Moore.

It was the late 1970s and Conner was tired of teaching high school English in her native Arkansas. So she applied to every newspaper, TV station and radio station she could think of around Little Rock, seeking to follow in the path blazed by the lead character in the '70s sitcom, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show.”

“She was kind of the career woman role model for girls my age in the late '70s. She was my hero — heroine, I guess I should say — she was my hero and I remember her working for Mr. Grant, and I just thought that looked glamorous, I really did,” Conner said. “And it got me out of classroom, conjugating verbs for students in Russellville, Ark. I thought: I want to try this.”

The first to respond was a Little Rock radio station that was looking for someone to write and produce commercials.

“And the radio job paid \$50 more a month” than teaching, she said. “Isn't that the funniest?”

From that first job, Conner has grown to be the general manager of WXTU-92.5 FM, known as “Philadelphia's Country Music.” Under her management, the station has been nominated for a Marconi Award by the National Association of Broadcasters, and Radio Station of the Year by the Country Music Association. She said the station has also set revenue records and been honored internally by the owner, Beasley Broadcasting Group Inc.

“It's the staff; it's absolutely the people that I work with at the station, that I am blessed to work with every single day of my life,” she said. “I have the greatest job in all the land. It's awesome.”

That kind of enthusiasm is the defining characteristic of Conner, said Lora Lewis, creative services director at WXTU.

“She is the most enthusiastic, involved manager I have ever met,” Lewis said.

For all her success on the sales side of radio, Conner had intended to become a journalist, making use of her master's degree in English and her experience as a writer. The job producing ads came up first and she took it. But even that quickly gave way to an unexpected new direction after a little more than a year.

That career in sales led her to stations in a variety of markets across the country, first with Clear Channel Communications, later with Beasley.

She's been in Philadelphia 15 years — which has not altered her rich Arkansas accent — 14 of those years at WXTU, first as national sales manager and director of sales and lately at the helm.

Although country music is often associated with her native South, Conner said, she has found that listeners in this big Northern city are receptive.

“The folks in Philadelphia are no differ-



Natalie Conner

UP CLOSE

NAME: Natalie Conner

AGE: 51

TITLE: Vice president/general manager

EMPLOYER: WXTU-FM

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Became general manager this year after serving 14 years as national sales manager and sales manager. Previously worked at stations in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. General chair of the Philadelphia Leadership Council of the Public Relations Society of America and a member of the Country Music Association Advisory Board for Interep Advertising.

EDUCATION: M.A. in English, B.A. in English/education, Arkansas Tech University

HOMETOWN: Marianna, Ark.

CURRENT HOME: Narberth

ent from the folks in Little Rock, Ark., — they've got great family values,” she said. “They're worried about their families. They want to make sure they've got a job they want to go to that supports their family. [Country music] truly embraces family values. It always has and it always will.”

"I was going to set an example for women"

Jane Dalton blazes a trail for a new generation of female attorneys

SEAN SCULLY

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

When Jane Dalton began her law career, she was something of a curiosity — a female trial lawyer in a field dominated by men.

One of the older partners in her firm would tell her "Now be sure to tell people you're a lawyer, not a secretary," Dalton recalls. "And I would tell them and they wouldn't hear it. He would tell them and they wouldn't always hear it. Times have changed."

Dalton was the first female partner in the firm of Duane Morris. She is also vice chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, a position that puts her in line to be only the fourth woman to head the organization in its 203-year history.

Women today, she said, move easily through the legal profession with hardly an eyebrow raised.

Sheldon Bonovitz, the chairman and CEO of Duane Morris, has known Dalton since she first came to the firm. He said her skill as a lawyer and warm personality have made her a role model for the lawyers who have come after her.

"She's extremely well-liked. She's a very

down-to-earth person," he said. "There are no airs, no arrogance. She's somebody who doesn't try to impress you with how good she is, what she knows — it just comes through."

Dalton didn't start out to be a lawyer. Instead, she wanted to be either a professor of Russian history, or an urban planner. Straight out of school, she tried a stint at the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. She quickly discovered that the best she could hope for was to be shuffling papers involved in the redevelopment of Society Hill.

"My tenure at the redevelopment authority demonstrated to me that, at least at the positions starting at the ground, urban planning wasn't really as exciting as I had thought," she said.

Nor, she said, was the path upward open for women.

"That was just clear," she said. "I can't really tell you how, but everybody knew it."



Jane Dalton

Part of her job, though, had been to monitor contracts, and that led her to work closely with the redevelopment authority's lawyers. So she decided to give the law a try.

At the time, most female lawyers — to the extent that there were any — went into estate work. The idea, she said, seemed to be that most clients would be widows, who might relate better to a woman. Dalton, however, wanted to try something that would play into her strengths as a talker and a quick thinker.

The partners at Duane Morris saw her potential and she became one of only a handful of women in the city directly involved in litigation, specializing in employment law.

Along the way, she has successfully raised four children, one of whom is a lawyer while another is considering law school.

Although she acknowledges that she has blazed a trail for women in the city, she

UP CLOSE

NAME: Jane Dalton

AGE: 61

TITLE: Partner

EMPLOYER: Duane Morris LLP

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Hired by Duane Morris straight out of law school, became the first female partner in 1978; currently vice-chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, will become chancellor-elect next year; serves as judge pro tempore of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas; serves on the Judicial Council of Pennsylvania; served for eight years on the Philadelphia Police Advisory Commission.

EDUCATION: B.A. in modern European history, Smith College; J.D., University of Pennsylvania.

HOMETOWN: Cleveland

CURRENT HOME: Chestnut Hill

balks at being called a "pioneer."

"I guess I'm not sure what a pioneer feels like," she said with a laugh. "I did feel like all along that I had a responsibility not only to my career, but that I was going to set an example for better or worse for women who would come after me." ■

"I would walk in to watch the commercials"

A family legacy of athletics and a passion for advertising helps Betty Tuppeny build a business

SEAN SCULLY

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Betty Tuppeny knew there had to be a better way.

While industries of all sorts were becoming leaner — outsourcing whole divisions, relying on contractors for skills they needed only occasionally — public relations and marketing companies remained mired in the old way of doing things. PR companies insisted on keeping the whole thing in-house, keeping all the talent they might need on staff.

So in 1993, Tuppeny jumped into creating a new kind of company, Domus Inc., one which kept a small core of professionals on staff, but otherwise relied on a cloud of freelancers and contractors to provide highly focused and customized marketing services to its clients.

"We almost form a virtual agency or team for each client ... we're able to give them the right resources and also stay very fluid and nimble," she said.

That means, for example, that for a client in the pharmaceutical industry, Tuppeny might turn to freelancers or companies with extensive experience with marketing drugs, whereas a client in the carpet industry would have an en-

tirely different team at his disposal.

The success of the company stems directly from the energy and determination of Tuppeny, said Tom McAndrews, her business partner.

In the tough, male-dominated world of corporate management, McAndrews said, Tuppeny has managed to compete and thrive without losing herself.

"She's done this without forfeiting any of her femininity, without losing any of the essential goodness as a person," McAndrews said.

Tuppeny came up through two well-known local marketing companies, Earle Palmer Brown and The Weightman Group. Both, she said, were great companies, but she had this nagging feeling that something could be improved.

Finally, she and McAndrews hit on the new formula after McAndrews, a former executive in the carpet industry, kept demanding to know why marketing companies insisted on keeping so many



Betty Tuppeny

people on the payroll.

Together, they decided to try outsourcing much of the specialized work of marketing and PR, an approach the rest of the industry is only now getting into.

Tuppeny always knew she wanted to be in marketing, right from her earliest days.

"Everyone used to walk out of the room when commercials were on, but I would walk in to watch the commercials," she said. "It just always completely fascinated me."

But why commercials?

"I think just the creativity," she said. "Just right away I realized there were certain commercials I would see over and over again and I didn't like from the start, and there were others that I kept wanting to see them."

She would enlist her four sisters into an impromptu dramatic production.

"We used to act out the commercials — that was my idea," she said.

That love of marketing dovetailed

UP CLOSE

NAME: Betty Tuppeny

AGE: 45

TITLE: CEO

EMPLOYER: Domus Inc.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Founded

Domus Inc. in 1993; worked previously in marketing and PR with The Weightman Group and Earle Palmer Brown; headed marketing subcommittee of the Philadelphia Hospitality Board; member board of directors of the Police Athletic League and Philadelphia Industrial Development Corp.

EDUCATION: B.A. in communication, University of Pennsylvania

HOMETOWN: Philadelphia

CURRENT HOME: Center City

closely with her love of sports. Her father Jim Tuppeny was the longtime track coach at Villanova University, and he instilled in his daughters a love of sports.

"I was kind of coached through life," she said. Playing softball, as she did, "stirred my tenaciousness to be an entrepreneur."

"You really need to have a disciplined approach, to keep trying," Tuppeny said.