

marin women's hall of fame

Tiburon woman honored for career success and dedication to nonprofits

By **EMILY LAVIN**

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When Cherie Sorokin applied for Bank of America's corporate secretary position in 1986, she was the only female candidate to compete for the job, which had never before been held by a woman.

As a result, she received some questions during the interview that were likely not asked of her male counterparts.

"There were a lot of questions about, could I withstand the swear words I would hear, would my presence completely alter the tenor of meetings and make (executives) less likely to tell the truth or pull their punches," she says.

However, she says, her skills trumped any gender bias. She had a proven ability to help people break down complex issues, broad knowledge of the banking business and experience attending corporate meetings — all important for the role, which was based out of the bank's then-headquarters in San Francisco and involved planning and executing board meetings, keeping records and minutes and advising executives.

"So I got the job," she says.

And she made her mark, holding the job, which previously had been a rotating position among men in the legal department, for about 13 years. The role was the capstone of the Tiburon resident's two-decade career at Bank of America, where she climbed the ladder — moving from lawyer to group executive vice president to corporate secretary — and put a few cracks of her own in the corporate glass ceiling.

Now Sorokin, 77, is being honored for her career success — and her dedication



CLARA LU / FOR THE ARK

Cherie Sorokin, seen in her Tiburon home, is one of five 2019 inductees into the Marin Women's Hall of Fame. Sorokin, 77, is being honored for her 20-year career as a lawyer and corporate secretary at Bank of America and for her involvement with nonprofits including Marin Villages and the American Association of University Women.

to nonprofits such as Marin Villages and the American Association of University Women — as one of five 2019 inductees into the Marin Women's Hall of Fame. She and the other inductees join an elite group of about 150 women who have earned the honor since the program began in 1987.

"I'm very grateful," Sorokin says of the recognition. "I knew that somebody had submitted my name, but I was doubtful that I qualified. It's humbling."

From Spanish teacher to re-entry student to lawyer

Sorokin was raised in Evanston, Ill., and

went to college at Indiana University in Bloomington. She started her career teaching Spanish at the university level. She also taught the language at the elementary school, junior high and high school levels.

However, she wasn't certain about teaching as a long-term career. Her friend's husband was in law school at the time and would share stories of the experience. Sorokin's interest was piqued, and she enrolled at Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law.

Northwestern at the time was pretty progressive about enrolling women, she says; her class was about 20-25 percent women,

but there were only a handful of women like her: over 30 years old and married with a child.

She took to the experience.

"It was really exciting and intellectually stimulating, completely different than teaching Spanish to high school students who didn't want to learn it," she says.

After she graduated with a law degree in 1977, she set out to find a job, but she soon hit a roadblock.

"The firms that I interviewed with really didn't want women, and they didn't really trust the fact that I had been a teacher and that I was married and had a kid," she says.

She couldn't picture herself at any of those firms, so she turned her attention to the corporate world. Bank of America had recently opened a small office in Chicago, and after working as a summer intern there, Sorokin was offered a job.

"That's how I got into the legal profession," she says. "I had no dreams of being Perry Mason. I was just looking for another ticket, another career."

The job ended up being a good training ground for her. She got plenty of hands-on experience, mostly handling corporate loans and lease negotiations, and eventually she was running the office. However, after she divorced her first husband, she began to think about her career and realized she would probably have to move on if she wanted to advance.

Using humor to defuse bias while executive VP, corporate secretary

Bank of America first sent her to Mexico, but she says the head of the office there "just culturally was not prepared to have

if you go

The Marin Women's Hall of Fame will honor its 2019 inductees with a dinner and program beginning at 6 p.m. March 28 at the Peacock Gap Clubhouse, 333 Biscayne Drive, San Rafael.

Tickets: \$115.

Info: ywca-sf-marino.org.

a woman be head of the legal department."

"I didn't really want to do battle every day about that," she says.

So the company relocated her to the bank's legal office San Francisco. She eventually transitioned to group executive vice president before taking over as corporate secretary.

Tiburon resident Kathi Burke met Sorokin in 1992 when Burke joined Bank of America as the head of human resources, making Burke the most senior woman at the bank at the time.

The two connected, as there weren't many women at their respective levels at the bank.

Sorokin was "sought after as a very trusted confidential adviser" to the organization's executive directors, Burke says, but she was also known at work for her infectious sense of humor.

Burke says Sorokin created a character known as "Madame Typo," modeled loosely after Johnny Carson's Carnac the Magnificent segment, in which Carson would divine the answer to a question written on a card sealed inside an envelope, then tear open the envelope to reveal the question.

"She had this large black turban with a feather, she would wear a fringe scarf and adopt an Eastern European accent, and she would poke fun at the sort of foibles of cor-

porate life," Burke says, adding: "She just had everybody in stitches."

Another time, Sorokin helped Burke out with a human-resources presentation about lack of diversity in the bank's senior leadership ranks. Sorokin, Burke and another employee acted out a diversity hotline.

"She called him with questions about sexual harassment and things like that, and he would give completely wrong, politically incorrect answers, and I would step in and give a straight answer," Burke says.

Sorokin notes she often relied on her sense of humor to defuse any bias or sexism she encountered on the job.

She remembers early on in the corporate secretary role she would be managing committee meetings when one of the men in the room would curse.

"They would turn to me and say, 'Oh I'm so sorry, I apologize Cherie,'" she says. "I started to make jokes with them about the fact that I knew the word, and it was OK, I got why they were mad."

She developed an aptitude for walking a fine line when it came to being a woman in an often male-centric environment. She recalls there would be times when clients would call her "kiddo" or request she bring them coffee.

"You do eventually find a way to let people know you don't appreciate that," she says. "Sometimes you have to say it directly, sometimes not."

She says she was conscious of avoiding jobs where there was "pretty obvious blatant sexism"; Bank of America, in her experience, wasn't like that.

That's not to say the company didn't

need to be pushed, she says, but “there was something about the management team in the ’80s and ’90s that they were interested in making it a comfortable place for women to work.”

Semi-retirement leads to nonprofit work

Sorokin decided to leave Bank of America in 1999, after the company transferred its corporate headquarters to Charlotte, N.C. Sorokin, who was married to her second husband, Gideon Sorokin, wasn’t interested in relocating.

She spent some time working for a venture-capital startup, rewrote a book on corporate secretaries published by the American Bar Association and did some traveling. She currently works on a project basis with the Veaco Group doing corporate governance consulting.

In her semi-retirement, she’s also had time to focus on her work with nonprofits, including the American Association of University Women, which aims to “advance equity for women through advocacy, education, philanthropy and research.”

Her mom was a member of the organization while Sorokin was growing up, and Sorokin first got involved as a young woman living in Chicago.

“AAUW kind of introduced me to the intellectual underpinnings of feminism,” she says.

She was involved with the Marin chapter off and on during her career, serving as board president three times, and in 2017 she joined the nonprofit’s national board of directors, where she currently serves as sec-

retary and is on its Governance Committee.

Corte Madera resident Dale Satake, a longtime friend of Sorokin’s who is also involved with the Marin chapter of the association, has seen Sorokin’s commitment to the organization firsthand.

“She leads by example,” Stake says. “She is extremely sensitive to people’s feelings and focused on engaging people in the organization.”

Getting involved in the community

Sorokin carries the same passion into her work with Marin Villages, which helps seniors stay in their homes and in their communities by providing volunteers for companionship, driving, handywork and more.

She first contacted the group several years ago as her husband’s health was fading. A volunteer from the organization would come play chess with her husband, and the couple connected with others and attended a few dinners before her husband’s health got worse.

After Gideon died three years ago at age 86, Sorokin started volunteering with the organization and was asked to join the board. She currently serves as board president, where she says her focus is on helping the all-volunteer organization achieve sustainability.

Marin Villages is about more than just giving rides or doing errands, she says; it provides a vital public-health service.

“We help you participate in life for as long as you possibly can,” she says.

Sorokin has also served on other nonprofit boards, including American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, San Francisco

Pocket Opera and Dominican University of California’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute Advisory Council.

Nahid Angha, a 2005 inductee into the Marin Women’s Hall of Fame who was one of the people who nominated Sorokin for this year’s class, called Sorokin the “best example of a universal woman.”

She noted while women have made strides in the past several decades in many areas, equality in the workplace can still be a struggle.

“It is of the utmost import to acknowledge women who have advanced to the corporate leadership position and advocated for equality and moral and ethical conducts within the corporate world and honor them for their perseverance, endeavors and leadership and for keeping the door of equality open for the next generation,” she says.

Sorokin says she loves that the Hall of Fame honors everyday women.

“It’s about people who have contributed in some way to their career or life or done something that is worthy of saying, ‘Hey, pay attention to this,’” she says.

Though she was initially surprised to be recognized, she says she hopes her career and life accomplishments will inspire others to get involved and share their time and talents with their communities.

“I think connection is really important, and your knowledge just gets lost if you don’t do it,” she says.

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