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July 6, 2011



How an energetic real estate networking group of women is making a difference at work and in the community.

By: Dan Emerson | July 2011 | Executive Life



Photo Credit: MNCrew

On Sunday, Sept. 25, women will run the Twin Cities. About 2,500 women participate each year in the “Women Run the Cities” event, a fundraiser for charitable causes staged by MNCREW, a unique professional association for women in the commercial real estate industry.

Founded in 1995, MNCREW is a chapter of the National Network of Commercial Real Estate Women (NNCREW), an organization with 51 chapters and 5,200 members. MNCREW’s 200-plus members include construction and

development professionals, brokers, attorneys, property and asset managers, appraisers, financial professionals, architects, and title insurers—every discipline needed to create a successful transaction.

“We’re a little different from the other real estate associations in the Twin Cities,” says the group’s president Barb Chirinos, a business development exec with the Bloomington office of Stewart Title. “Most of the others are very specific to individual sectors of the business, whereas MNCREW is inclusive of all disciplines in commercial real estate. For someone who is just coming into the industry, or wanting to test whether it is the right place for them, MNCREW is the perfect opportunity to network with people of all different disciplines. We’ve got members who can get a deal done from start to finish—from architects to space-planners to brokerage, title, financing, law and all the other ancillary services.”

When the organization was founded, it filled a vacuum, “mainly because women are a minority in the commercial real estate industry,” Chirinos said. “MNCREW has filled a void by giving women a place to connect with each other, network, refer business and form long-lasting relationships.”

It’s an influential group. MNCREW members average 14 years of commercial real estate experience. More than 63% are presidents, CEOs, partners or senior managers of their companies

Women have historically been under-represented in many areas of commercial real estate, particularly the broker category. It’s indeed been a male-dominated industry, says race founder Meghan Huber, a construction manager for Stahl Construction, and a past president of MNCREW. “The organization provides a way for me to network with other women, mentor and empower other women, and help each other be the best we can be.”

“We have so much to offer to both our younger members and our more seasoned members,” Chirinos notes. “Our younger members have access to some of the most successful and entrepreneurial women in the Twin Cities commercial real estate industry. Our seasoned members, now in leadership positions, have access to some of the brightest and most talented group of up-and-coming women in our industry.”

The group holds its monthly meeting on the third Wednesday of each month and a casual, networking breakfast on each fifth Friday.

MNCREW is nonprofit, and sponsors a number of charitable events and organizations. The race,

which is the group's signature event, involves 2,500 women each year. The event includes a 5k (roughly three miles) challenge race, a 10-mile race for more advanced runners, and a 1-mile girls race for any age level. The three races start in Minnehaha Park in South Minneapolis.

Another fund-raising event is the annual Golf Event, to be held this year on Aug. 3 at Theodore Wirth Golf Course in Minneapolis.

Using funds raised by the annual events, the organization has provided scholarships to women students in real estate programs at St. Cloud State University and the University of St. Thomas. It has also provided a scholarship for girls through the Ann Bancroft Foundation where they can learn risk-taking and courage-boosting skills.

Another activity features members visiting area colleges to inform men and women about various real estate opportunities and the best way to prepare for those professions. MNCREW offers student memberships "so they can meet people in the field and find out what kinds of jobs are out there," Huber explains. The group also arranges professional internships for second- or third-year students.

MNCREW members visit high schools to "get students thinking about how they could have a successful career," Huber says. As part of each visit, MNCREW reps help the students develop and execute a simulated real estate deal to give them a look into the inner workings of the profession.

Networking, however, is one of MNCREW's most important functions, Huber points out. In a profession where intelligence about potential deals and other news is spread through word of mouth and other informal communication, "We all are looking for new projects, new opportunities and we all share leads," Huber says. According to a member survey, more than 75% of MNCREW members have received or given a referral to another member. Nearly 50% reported having conducted a commercial real estate transaction with another member.

Professional education is another key part of MNCREW's mission; at its monthly meetings, the group provides programs to help licensed brokers fulfill their continuing education requirements. Recent topics have included trends in environmental due diligence, "green" building trends, real estate negotiation skills and developments in the title industry.

And as it does each September, MNCREW will achieve its highest visibility on the morning of Sept. 25, when 2,500 running-shoe-clad women will take to the streets—a fun event with a serious purpose.

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