

GROWTH STRATEGIES

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JANUARY 10-16, 2003 23

CALENDAR

Tuesday, Jan. 14

North Penn Women's Network Luncheon. 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Bay Pony Inn, 508 Old Skippack Road, Lederach. Cost is \$20 for members, \$30 for nonmembers. For information/registration call 215-362-9200.

Harnessing the Power of Blended Learning Case Study. 8:30 a.m. to noon, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 10 Independence Mall, 7th and Arch Street, Philadelphia. Presented by PA/DE Chapters of the U.S. Distance Learning Association. Free. For information/registration call 610-449-5899.

Wednesday, Jan. 15

Jewish Business Network Power Lunch. Noon to 1:30 p.m., Temple University Center City Campus, 1515 Market St., Room 222, 2nd floor. Presented by The Jewish Business Network. Cost is \$18. For information/registration call 215-574-9280.

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BOB FLEISCHHAUER / BUSINESS JOURNAL

Bea Leopold runs the National Society of Genetic Counselors from her Wallingford home.

Giving voice to genetics

ADAM STONE
SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

WALLINGFORD — When Bea Leopold came aboard 15 years ago as head of the fledgling National Society of Genetic Counselors, she had her work cut out for her. The budget at that time? "We had no budget," she recalls.

A national membership organiza-

tion, NSGC represents health professionals who provide information and support to those who may face a higher-than-usual risk of inheriting birth defects or genetic disorders. Fifteen years ago, little was known about specific genetic risks, and the association was generating only about \$65,000 a year.

All that changed in 1993, when sci-

entists identified a specific gene associated with breast cancer. Since then, the number of genetic counselors has grown from 600 to almost 2,000 nationwide, and the number of masters-level training programs has swelled from 11 to 26 nationwide.

NSGC has grown too. Five years ago it was working off a \$500,000 annual

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NSGC: Genetics association has maintained sustained growth in funds

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budget, and last year the budget topped \$1 million for the first time, with a wiser and more experienced Bea Leopold still at the helm.

"Fifteen years ago, I did not have quite the understanding that I do now about the importance of keeping the pulse of the membership, and at the same time looking at the vision of where the group needs to go," she said. "The balance of those two is what really makes a successful leader."

While the various members may have particular professional interests and agendas, "my job as the director is to make this entire association be successful, without the particular baggage that you may have when you are actually entrenched in the field," Leopold said. "We both have different views, and the teamwork between the volunteers and the non-volunteer leader is what is needed to make the group go forward."

Those who have watched Leopold over the years say she has devoted herself to maintaining that balance.

"She knows who her customers are. She really knows genetic counselors," said friend and mentor Connie Beresin, chief development officer at Jewish Employment and Vocational Service in Philadelphia. "All of those members are her customers, and she goes out of her way to know them. She knows what the field is about, and she understands what they need."

Over the years NSGC has met those professional needs on a number of fronts.

Its annual conference is a strong draw: The November 2001 conference in Washington, D.C., attracted more than 1,000 people and saw fewer than three dozen cancellations, despite the profound impact the Sept. 11 attacks were having at that time.

The association also offers continuing education and networking opportunities, as well as the kind of advocacy work that helps an association stay relevant. While some such groups have been marginalized by the ready availability of professional information on the Internet, Leopold has found a mix of services that she says keeps NSGC significant.

"Yes, you can find information on the Internet, but that does not negate the need for the genetic counselors to have an umbrella voice for their profession," she said.

Leopold was not born speaking the language of association management.

In the 1970s she taught learning-disabled students. Then in 1980 she launched her own small business specializing in marketing communications. In the course of seven years she met all sorts of people, including those in the field of genetic counseling. When she felt the time was right for another change, she sent 21 letters to her "A" list contacts, and soon heard back from the NSGC, which was then an all-volunteer organization.

As the group's first paid staff person, she got to call many of her own shots. That's why she is able to work from a home office today, with the support of three other junior staff

members, all of whom also work from their homes.

On the other hand, she had no colleagues to turn to for advice in those early years. Instead, she joined the American Society of Association Executives, or ASAE, where she learned many of the fine points of association management.

Mostly, she said, it boils down to having a solid plan.

"There are ideas out there, and every one is potentially a great idea, so you have to have a strategic plan against which to measure all these fine ideas that are brought forward," she said. "That makes it a lot easier to stay on task."

In 1991, NSGC put into place its own strategic plan, and the document has never sat still since.

"We don't have a plan that sits on the shelf. It's a two-year plan and we work constantly toward that vision," she said. "By revising it every two years we are able to stay ahead of the curve in terms of what our members perceive us to be and what our board believes us to be. That is, we can identify the members' key issues and compare them to where we think that we are going. That way we can be sure we are not going too far astray from where our members' interests lie."

Those who know Sachs say this ability to synthesize the concerns of others is one of the chief assets that has helped her drive the continued success of NSGC over the years.

"She will always ask the right questions," said Linda Sacks, a senior vice

THE SHORT OF IT

Company: National Society of Genetic Counselors

Location: Wallingford

Executive Director: Bea Leopold

Type of company: Professional association

Budget:

1999: \$702,000

2000: \$715,000

2001: \$762,000

2002: \$1.05 million as of Dec. 10

Source: NSGC

president at Biosis, a nonprofit group supporting the life-sciences industries. Leopold serves on the Biosis board.

"As our meetings unfold, she will take it all in, and then in the last hour, she has digested it all," Sacks said. "Then she will ask extremely good, pointed questions that will bring it all together and really turn the discussion around."

Those same skills have served Leopold well, as she has led NSGC through 15 years of consistent growth, both in terms of its membership and its budget. With genetics an ever-expanding field in contemporary medicine, Leopold expects that growth to continue. ●