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Close-up: Deborah Davidson

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## CREW president sets high goals for women in commercial real estate

By THOR KAMBAN BIBERMAN

Deborah Davidson, Barrister Executive Suites sales and marketing manager and president of **CREW (Commercial Real Estate Women) San Diego** has ambitious goals for her 90-member organization, which is celebrating its 25th year.

Davidson, who has worked for a wide range of lending firms such as Northern Trust, Security Pacific and CalFedbanks, has been employed by executive suites firms in downtown, Mission Valley and now Carmel Valley. She joined CREW about five years ago and has been on the board of directors for the past four years.

"My goals are to grow CREW to over 100 members, educate and promote women in commercial real estate, and also be a charitable force in the community," Davidson said.

She and CREW are actively promoting the Big Sister League and its Bridges of Hope programs that mentor financially disadvantaged women. CREW will also hold a charitable golf tournament for the Big Sister League May 16 at the Lomas Santa Fe Country Club.

While Davidson would like to get the CREW (formerly known as Women in

Commercial Real Estate, or WICRE) membership above the 100-member level, she admits it isn't always an easy task in a down economy. She emphasizes, however, it is precisely in a down economy when the networking provided by CREW becomes the most important.

Davidson is concerned that CREW membership could end up taking a backseat to a troubled economy, a volatile stock market and a presidential election, but says that both the prospective member and the organization lose when it happens.

CREW San Diego president-elect Debra Aitken, who joined the organization in 2001, agrees.

"I don't think the need for these relationships wane in more difficult times. In fact, it is the opposite. We have to help these individuals develop professionally," Aitken said.

Aitken, a California Bank & Trust assistant vice president, said she joined because of the networking, the CREW luncheons with forecasts and other topics of interest in the commercial real estate industry.

Like Davidson, she has a desire to expand membership and bring more women into professions connected with commercial real estate.

Bank of America business banker Susan Couch had similar reasons for joining.

"I initially joined because of the quality of the educational programs, the special events, the resources ... these were a big draw for me," Couch said.



Deborah Davidson is Barrister Executive Suites sales and marketing manager and the president of CREW.

She added that through the organization, she has obtained invaluable information ranging from the state of the overall financing market to how developers are faring through these difficult times.

Another major challenge for CREW in a soft economy is competing with other organizations, such as the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties (NAIOP) and the Building Owners & Managers Association (BOMA), which often have memberships subsidized by their member companies.

NAIOPs and BOMA's dues are based on levels of membership. CREW-San Diego has an annual \$425 membership. Some CREW memberships cost more or less, depending on where they are in the country.

When not inviting members to CREW, Davidson, at Barrister, is educating small-business owners to take space in executive suites for anywhere from three months to a year, instead of a more traditional multiple-year commitment in a typical lease.

It is the flexibility that makes the executive suite popular, Davidson said.

"Three months to a year is nothing in time compared to a standard lease," Davidson said.

As for her own business, Davidson said Barrister Executive's client list includes certified public accountants, attorneys and small biotechnology firms waiting for capital so they may grow their companies.

Los Angeles-based Barrister has executive suites in separately owned projects, including Golden Eagle Plaza downtown, Hazard Center in Mission Valley and Torrey Reserve.

"The property manager in every building is a CREW member," Davidson said. "Not one of us thought we were going to end up in commercial real estate."

CREW has established the CREW Careers program to foster the next generation of female commercial real estate executives.

"We teach high-school girls to spend Saturdays studying lending, property management, title and other issues," Davidson said.

The CREW Careers program uses one or more real or imaginary retail or other commercial real estate developments to illustrate all of the various aspects of a commercial real estate project, including how to take it from raw land to an occupied development, and the career opportunities that flow from such developments.

Davidson explained that when WICRE was founded 25 years ago, there were very few women anywhere who were in commercial real estate. Today, members must have at least five years of commercial real estate experience before they may join.

Men also may join, and some men have become members in the local chapter.

Davidson said between 10 percent to 15 percent of her members are in the contracting field, 10 percent to 15 percent are in commercial brokerage or leasing, about 10 percent are in property management, 5 percent are real estate attorneys and the remainder are from other fields.

Under the CREW banner, more than 1,000 members and non-members attend the annual national convention.

"About 50 percent of the attendees are non-members," Davidson said, adding that attendance has doubled within the past four years.

The next national CREW convention will be Oct. 15-18 at the Hilton Americas in Houston.

Along with Davidson, the other CREW San Diego board members include: Aitken of California Bank & Trust, past CREW San Diego president and president-elect; Couch of Bank of America, first vice president of membership; Julie Allen Neal of Janez Group, second vice president of sponsorship; Anne Bengé of Contract Interiors, director of membership; Angela Rauzi of Dowling Construction, director of sponsorship; Tara Yamauchi of Brickman, director of public relations and marketing; Sara Gilman of San Diego National Bank, director of programs; Lisa Irvin, The Hearn Co., treasurer; Maria Crowell of Swinerton Builders, national delegate; Misty Moore of The Staubach Co., national delegate; and Tamara Chimia, CREW San Diego Chapter administration.