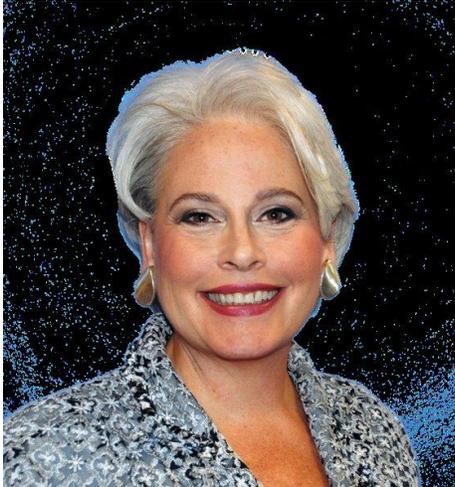


## Early Leader Mary Huss, President and Publisher, *San Francisco Business Times*

By Jenny Erwin

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Do you know what a gift it is to sit down with Mary Huss and talk to her about her interesting and varied career in the publishing industry? I had that opportunity in December just before she took off on a travel adventure to the Philippines. It had taken us a long time to get together for this interview, but it was well worth the wait. *Read the rest of her story.....*

I had first learned of Mary from her counterpart at the Phoenix Business Journal and was encouraged to connect with her when I first moved to the Bay area in 1999. Fortunately, my work brought me in contact with Mary and the *San Francisco Business Times*, but we rarely had the opportunity for an extended conversation. What I knew before our recent conversation was that she has been a well-respected fixture in the San Francisco business community for many years and that the *Business Times* has taken a lead in highlighting the work and success of Bay area women. But there is so much more to her story. She is a smart, funny and creative visionary whose leadership helped propel **the San Francisco Business Times to the top ranking in the field of business newspapers.**

### **When did you join IWF and what was your position at that time?**

I joined the Forum in 1997 on the recommendation of Eunice Azzani who was well known in the business community as a Senior Client Partner with Korn Ferry International. I had come to the Bay area in 1992 from Philadelphia when I was asked to take on the turnaround of the San Francisco Business Times. In Philadelphia (first as ad director, then as publisher), I had taken the underperforming *Philadelphia Business Journal* from the bottom to a revenue leader in the company. I faced a similar situation when I accepted the offer to be the new publisher of the *San Francisco Business Times*. The publication was relatively new, only 5 years old but it was also ranked at the bottom of our company's (then) 30-plus business journals, and going backwards.

### **Tell me more about your early work experience and the role it played in your move to the Bay area as the publisher of the Business Times.**

I have a journalism degree and began my career in St Louis, my home town. My first job was with a startup newspaper, on a team lead by a passionate young journalist / entrepreneur, also a recent graduate from the journalism school I attended. I got to do everything – interestingly, both selling and writing, helping with production and distribution too. Once the initial publication was launched and as we struggled to make it financially viable, our entrepreneurial leader had an idea for a newspaper serving the downtown working population – and he came to me and asked if I'd like to have my own newspaper. He gave me the germ of an idea, said he had no time to devote to this, and that he and the others would focus on making the original newspaper successful. So I wrote up a plan, we came up with a name, I did a little research, and the next day I headed downtown and started talking to merchants and business

associations about the vision. Two months later *The Riverfront Times* was born. I was literally on the downtown streets the day after Thanksgiving handing out newspapers. The publication was modeled after other alternative newspapers of the era. I was the editor of *The Riverfront Times* and wrote most of the stories. And—again, a little unconventional—I sold all of the ads. I still remember calling Ray (the entrepreneur) from a phone booth after I sold a 6 X ad contract to a local bank, our first advertiser, having sold something that did not yet exist. The experience of creating something from nothing, with no fear that I wouldn't be able to do it, was a foundation for everything else in my career.

About six months into “my” publication, the founder was not able to make the other publication work while *The Riverfront Times* was succeeding, gaining readers and advertisers. It had gone from monthly to bi-weekly, and was more niche-focused than the other publication (another key lesson for me). He had to let everyone go and then he and I together went on to build *The Riverfront Times*, which soon became a thriving weekly. After I left to join the daily paper a couple of years later Ray went on to build it into a community powerhouse, and many years later sold it for several million dollars. It is still part of the St. Louis scene today.

While I was building *The Riverfront Times*, many of my journalism school friends were working at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the daily newspaper. The Post had once offered me a job that I turned down because *The Riverfront Times* was my baby and I could not leave it, but the second time they came calling I did take a position at the Post. By then *The Riverfront Times* had a small staff and was growing. I was ready for something new.

However, I quickly learned that working in a union environment and large organization was not as fulfilling as being in a startup culture. I was used to working long hours and at the Post it was frowned upon to work beyond the union hours.

A year into that job, a man who had invested in *The Riverfront Times* was starting another publication—the *St. Louis Business Journal*. He called me one day to ask if I would join the startup as the circulation and marketing director. I knew nothing about building a paid circulation, but I sure missed being in an entrepreneurial business, and I had a lot of respect for this man. He envisioned a network of business journals all across the country (most markets did not have them at the time).

Again, it was a band of young journalists with startup zeal bringing this publication to life. I had moved to the business side and no longer did any reporting, and learned just how goal-driven I am. I had to figure out every aspect of what it took to build paid subscribers, and put it all into action but ultimately it became a model for how it was done, and to this day the *St. Louis Business Journal* has one of the largest paid subscriber bases in the country. I was able to help hire and train other circulation directors as we started business journals in other markets. Six years later I moved to Philadelphia to become the advertising sales director of the *Philadelphia Business Journal*, one of the later startups. It was struggling financially at the time. I was able to turn around the ad team and take that publication to the top revenue position in the company. While I was there, to my surprise, our founder sold us to another fast-growing business journal startup and soon after that our publisher left. This opened up that position, and I was fortunate enough to be selected to be the publisher of the *Philadelphia Business Journal* and continue to build that.

There was a lot of merger and acquisition activity going on when the local business journal companies grew up in the mid-to-late 80's. While I was there the Philadelphia publication was sold; however, it eventually came back into the fold of American City Business Journals, both the parent company of the San Francisco Business Times and the nation's premier print and digital publisher of local business news. Every time you were suddenly sold to a new owner, that in itself was a lesson in how to keep your culture and priorities, and stay focused on keeping what you were building going.

During all of this era of startups and mergers, the *San Francisco Business Times* was started in 1986 as a sole enterprise by a man who had been involved since the startup days with American City Business Journals. He got his own funding, started with a bang, but it quickly became too much for him and American City Business Journals bought it from him. The ACBJ CEO at the time reached out to me in Philadelphia and asked if I would be interested in coming out and running the struggling 5-year-old publication. At the time, Philadelphia was one of the largest and most financially successful. San Francisco was basically running on fumes and losing money. I was ready for a change in my life, and had a desire to live on the West Coast, so I said yes. All of that startup and turnaround experience came into play – and ultimately, the *San Francisco Business Times* has grown to be one of the top revenue and profit producers for the company, which is now a much larger enterprise. It took an amazing team to get there and it has been a lot of fun along the way.

Now 25 years later, I still thrive on entrepreneurship and change – very important, given how much our industry is changing. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to do this in the most exciting and vibrant business community in the country. I have loved being a part of the Bay Area community, and the IWF community here is such an important part of that.

**What knowledge did you have about the early history of the group and what were the circumstances that prompted you to become a member?**

While I learned about the Forum through Eunice, I didn't have much information about its early history. One of the first things I heard about was summer camp, although it took me a few years to actually get to a summer camp. But now I rarely miss one. What I observed was that the members were in respected leadership roles in the business community and they supported and helped open doors for other women. As I got to know some of the early members, I saw some were a half generation ahead of me as “the first” to break into the traditional male leadership positions. Some had come from larger corporations while in my startup experiences I had experienced fewer barriers. I saw from their stories how tough it had been to succeed in larger corporations. There were entrepreneurs in the group as well, and it was such an interesting mix, and clearly a community of accomplished women who valued shared experiences. I felt I could learn from them professionally and personally. But – and this is my loss – I was so focused on my business I don't think I took advantage of how much opportunity there was to learn and connect with these amazing women. I would tell new members – dive in early and take advantage of the many opportunities to forge those relationships.

**What was the most challenging aspect of your career at the time you joined and how did the organization provide support to help you deal with this?**

Challenging for me is just having the time to invest, especially when I was so focused on getting the business going in the right direction. I was new to the Bay area and did not have the business connections

or even yet the deep friendships that are so important. I realized that the Forum would quickly provide many valuable professional connections to women leaders and the various business communities. These connections helped fast forward my acclimation and immersion into my new career and community. Knowing that the Forum is there provides a support group and a “safety net” of sorts, with a whole group of women eager to connect and offer support in many forms. I was and still am grateful for the Forum’s support and help on both professional and personal fronts. It is a very welcoming group.

**What was the major benefit of membership when you joined either WFW or Professional Women’s Alliance? What do you see as the major membership benefit now?**

Friendships and access to other professionals were the major benefits when I first joined. There’s a lot to learn too. I have always felt that the IWF community is a supportive community, and I now want to do more to be supportive of the organization as well. Another major benefit I hear about all the time is the opportunity to participate in the international events and travel. Although I have not attended one of these conferences, I do plan to do that in the future because the value others get from it is palpable. I have also seen IWF evolve with an ever-increasing variety of new members. Truly wonderful women, added to an already wonderful group. This I see as another valuable membership perk. Finally, the organization provides members opportunities to take leadership roles different from those they have within their own organizations. The membership benefits today are not that different from when I joined except that there are now more members with even more diverse backgrounds. To me, there is more engagement and opportunity to engage meaningfully now than ever before.

**It’s been 35 + years since IWF started but is it easier now for women in your field to advance to the top leadership roles? Why or why not? What are the current challenges/barriers?**

While it is better in many ways thanks to the increasing progress of women and more role models, it is still shocking how some things haven’t changed. The case in point is that the number of women on boards of public companies has not significantly increased.

There are many reasons to be optimistic. I am pleased that the new CEO of PG&E is a woman, for example. But I think this year’s political climate underscores that there are still deep seated biases that hold women back, and still those who are not comfortable with women in the top role. There are many more opportunities to have the top job in more entrepreneurial sectors. Groups like IWF are more important than ever, and we need to keep plugging away to put more women in leadership roles and in the board room.

**Describe the impetus and evolution of your publication’s Women of Influence recognition event, i.e. purpose, its success and plans for the future.**

I’ve always been interested in advancing women’s leadership, and we’ve been very supportive of women’s leadership groups and events. I was very involved in my first 15 years here with the PBWC Conference, something started by Congresswoman Jackie Speier. In my time on the board, and working on the conference, I came to know so many outstanding women leaders. The conference itself had such a following, and I saw and experienced how important it is to shine a light on women leaders and share their stories, as well as to create opportunities for women to connect with their peers. I don’t know exactly what sparked the first Influential Women recognition event and publication. It just fits what we do, what I believe in, and what the market responded to. It has evolved over the years, and we are still evolving it and fine tuning it now. What has

been most gratifying about it has been the stories I've heard about connections that have been made – for business, for board recruitment, and for friendship – even hiking groups!

**How has this event positively impacted women's leadership and the Bay area's ability to attract and support women's leadership?**

There are many positive outcomes from this annual event that's held each June in San Francisco and from the special edition of the *Business Times* describing their winner's accomplishments. It shows just how many top level women are out there in our companies, and tells their stories. This year the group of women leaders who advised us recommended we put more emphasis on the scope of the P&L the leaders oversee, which will really illustrate the degree of power and influence these women wield. It provides intelligent story telling about progress that is being made, and where it isn't, and the companies that support women's leadership.

These Women of Influence events now are signature events in all of our ACBJ markets, although they don't all look alike. About 10 years ago I was invited to be part of a think tank with other ACBJ women publishers to explore how we could create a national publication and event recognizing women leaders. Others in the company brought that to fruition, and we now have a national online publication called BizWomen.com, and a national program we all participate in called Mentoring Monday.

Mentoring Monday was launched four years ago, and we find our "Forever Influential" women love to participate as mentors. They also get the chance to reconnect with each other that morning. Mentoring Monday is a one-of-a-kind event that brings together women in a casual, fast-paced coaching atmosphere. This year the event will take place on April 3 in 43 *Business Journal* cities throughout the country and will involve about 8,600 women mentees with another 1,700 women serving as mentors. The event will offer the opportunity to choose from over 40 women mentors in each business community for one-on-one coaching sessions for seven minute conversations. It's a bit of organized chaos, and it is fast, fun and fulfilling.

**What are you most proud of in your career and what is your most significant contribution to your profession?**

First I am so proud that I have been able to support and help others grow in this profession. Four of my former managers became publishers, which makes me happy.

Second, I invest in my newsroom. I value journalism and journalists, and while I love to make a profit, it is never at the expense of having talent in the newsroom and the ability to provide quality news. So many media organizations have been forced to reduce head count. I have weathered the ups and downs relatively well.

Finally, I'm always proud when we make an impact. A good example is a couple of years ago we had the idea to publish an entire issue of the *Business Times* devoted to LGBT equality in the workplace, and we called it the "Business of Pride". It included a list of the top LGBT owned businesses in the region. It's now something we do every year, and we have a special celebration event as well. We poured our hearts into it. Every department was involved with this project, and I was so touched by the staff's passion and commitment to telling the story from many perspectives. And it was so enthusiastically received by the LGBT community who felt these stories needed to be told in the mainstream press.

**To what do you attribute your success?**

I work really hard and I enjoy my work. I have an uncanny filter that doesn't see barriers and so I have a different relationship with the word 'NO'. I am able to quickly envision what's next and stay focused on what I see and move ahead to make things happen.

**What is the best advice you got as you climbed the ladder to success? Is it still relevant for aspiring women leaders today?**

The best advice was to "catch people doing something right and then remember to acknowledge that." There is tremendous power in providing that recognition and feedback. And I'm not always the best at remembering to do it.

The other advice that has served me well is to "trust, then verify". Expect the best, but assume that some things will go wrong, and anticipate the pitfalls as well as the opportunities. Pay attention to the details. Keep your eye on the business and ask a lot of questions to obtain information, not for criticism or lack of trust, but to really know what's going on.

And most of all, believe in yourself and do not let someone tell you that it can't be done or, God forbid, that you'll never be able to do it.

**How do you define success?**

Success for me is achieving goals, and even better blowing them away. Plus having fun in the process. I like creating things, and seeing the impact they have. There's nothing better than having a vision, getting a team fully engaged and excited about it, and then the thrill of bringing it to life. I'm also very growth driven: revenue, profits, and importantly – people.

**Final thoughts**

My advice to my younger self (and to our new and seasoned members): Take full advantage of the connections, events, and conversations of IWF and make the time to forge the great friendships. It's so important to take the time to stop and smell the roses!