

Security Bank's
WOMEN
of Influence

2021 WOMEN OF INFLUENCE



DEB SARSANY
LISA CLEMMONS STOTT
SUSAN HELM
RIKEESHA PHELO
JULIE BENSON

DEB SARSANY

By Holly Whisler

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

Deb Sarsany is a broker and part-owner of The Real Estate Group, 3701 W. Wabash Ave., as well as president and lead broker of the Deb Sarsany Team – a stellar team of seven female real estate brokers that consistently rank in the top 1% of sales of all Capital Area REALTORS®. Sarsany gives credit to her team for their success but admits to “going full force and putting 150%” of herself into all of her endeavors – career, family and community involvement.

The words that Sarsany lives by daily are: “If it is to be, it is up to me.” She approaches each day by “eating the frog first,” a metaphor for tackling the least appealing task first so the remainder of the day will be a breeze. This productivity concept comes from the book *Eat That Frog!* by Brian Tracy, which Sarsany said is a “must read.”

Sarsany originally had her sights set on being a dental assistant and was a student in Lincoln Land Community College’s first dental assistant class. But life happened and plans changed; by 1989, Sarsany found herself in Topeka, Kansas, beginning her career in real estate. She explains it wasn’t out of any great inspiration or epiphany, but the consistent nudging of a friend who kept saying, “You’d be good at real estate, you should try it.”

Try it she did, but as a busy mom with three young kids and a husband who traveled frequently, she could not give it her all, and therefore, made the decision to give it up at that time. When her family moved to St. Louis and her children were more independent, she returned to real estate and also started a gift-giving business called Beyond Baskets. Sarsany was successful with the new venture, winning national awards and traveling across the country to speak and train other business owners. She later sold the business to a competitor.

Sarsany said, “It was when my family moved to Springfield that I really dove all the way into my real estate career. My kids were grown, and I decided I was going to be my own boss and set my own direction.” She has now made all of that, and more, a reality.

Sarsany’s list of accolades and accomplishments is lengthy. She has been on the Capital Area REALTORS® Honor Roll multiple times and served on numerous CAR committees. Sarsany serves on the board for Illinois Women in Leadership and Women Entrepreneurs of Central Illinois. Additionally, Sarsany wanted a more personal approach to networking with fellow entrepreneurs and serves as president of Capital Area Networkers, a group she founded.

She also gives back to the community through her involvement with various charitable organizations. Sarsany is the co-chair of Denim & Diamonds, an annual fundraising event to benefit cancer research. Sarsany lost both parents and a nephew to cancer and has a good friend living with breast cancer. She said, “Sometimes you get angry, and you find a way to help make a difference. If I can be a part of helping stop cancer that would be great – even if it is not in my lifetime.”

Sarsany also serves in multiple roles with Habitat for Humanity of Sangamon County, a nonprofit she said is close to her heart due to her own upbringing. She was raised by a single mother, who worked hard for the little they had, and said the experience left her “inspired to make



Photo by Josh Catalano

someone else’s life a little easier.”

At this point in life, Sarsany’s children are grown and they have given her five grandkids. She said, “Being a grandparent is by far the most rewarding thing ever.”

And while she works hard, Sarsany also loves to travel and take vacations; she claims to “have the biggest case of wanderlust.” She also enjoys motivational books and said, “I get incredible joy from knowing my team members are succeeding.”

It’s no surprise the one thing she does not like is sitting still.

LISA CLEMMONS STOTT

By Carey Smith

Growing up in central Illinois, Lisa Clemmons Stott aimed for a career in social work or journalism. “I thought it was important for a person to be involved in making their community better,” she recalls. After earning a degree in broadcast journalism, Clemmons Stott switched her aim and moved to Springfield, working for various state agencies. She got involved in issues concerning downtown Springfield in 2011 when she was named a co-chair of the Sustainable Design Assessment Team and became the executive director of Downtown Springfield, Inc. (DSI) five years ago.

Clemmons Stott’s enthusiasm for improving downtown Springfield is evident in hearing her talk about the myriad arts and entertainment projects she has initiated. She attributes a lot of their success to scouting out what other similarly sized communities are doing and replicating them here. “All these events that take place, we can see that people have pride. It’s very Instagrammable, and shows off the beauty of downtown in ways people take for granted or have forgotten about.”

DSI has 20 committees working on a variety of projects, from lighting to developing more partnerships to working on more family-friendly events with the aim of taking downtown “out of the pandemic in a strong way,” states Clemmons Stott. Among current projects is a second Levitt Amp series, with a summer of free family-friendly concerts on the former Y block.

Along Monroe Street, Springfield High School art students will be painting murals in vacant ground floor shops, using original designs and quotes from one of Clemmons Stott’s favorite books, *Strong Towns*, by Charles Marohn. It’s clear how well her work with downtown merges with Marohn’s theme of strengthening city cores.

“Downtown has generational wealth built into it. It was wealth that our ancestors built and left to us to be a resource,” Clemmons Stott says, noting that disregarding the inherent goodness in our downtown only hurts us. “From a financial perspective, from a pride perspective, downtown is important to the psyche of our community, whether people recognize it or not,” she said. “Downtown is the one neighborhood in Springfield in which people can live, work and play.”

One of Clemmons Stott’s goals has been to get younger people to see the potential in downtown, and the Momentum on Main Street program is designed to attract the next generation of entrepreneurs, investors and property developers.

DSI also supports the work of Innovate Springfield, which offers a 10-week program to enable entrepreneurs to turn their ideas into action plans. “We give scholarships to Innovate Springfield for their program, which brought two businesses into brick-and-mortar locations downtown. We’re seeing real change,” states Clemmons Stott.

She notes that over the last 18 months, renovations have begun on many downtown buildings that have recently changed hands. DSI is about to release a step-by-step guide to assist people who intend to renovate downtown buildings with upper floor residential units. “We’ve attracted a lot of people to the idea that downtown is a great place to run a business or have an investment property, and the future is bright,” she says.

Clemmons Stott says that she is honored and humbled by the recognition of being selected for Women of Influence, but she often feels more comfortable behind the scenes. “I love having other people shine. I feel like so many women in Springfield have influenced me, and it’s such a

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE



Photo by Josh Catalano

positive back-and-forth relationship.”

Clemmons Stott says she has enjoyed working with women such as Val Yazell, the former director of economic development for the City of Springfield and Abby Powell, the city’s TIF administrator, along with Katie Davison at Innovate Springfield.

“I always feel that there are still challenges in being a female leader, so being able to have women in other positions working on the same issues, we really do lift each other up,” she says. “I would never want to hog the limelight for myself, because it’s truly about having many people at the table and someone sparking an idea and another person adding to it. It’s humbling to be on this list, but I really use it as an opportunity to celebrate all the women I work with every day.”

This theme of collaboration and mutual respect resonates through every project Clemmons Stott has a hand in. When describing working in committees, she notes, “There’s something beautiful about that process, and it gives ownership of downtown to more people. I think that’s really important.”

As to her legacy, Clemmons Stott is proud of her accomplishment in stabilizing DSI and making it more resilient with funding from the city and other sources. She acknowledges her ability to set a big vision for the future and to get to work.

“I’ve always set an ambitious agenda, and I’m proud of the work we’ve done in the last five years.”

SUSAN HELM

By Karen Ackerman Witter

Susan Helm is an inspiration to many. She is extremely creative, a generous volunteer and a strong leader. She has big ideas and the ability to bring them to fruition by engaging others to see the vision and get involved. "Find something you love, and attach to it," advises Helm.

Helm is attached to many things she loves. She is a certified Master Gardener and Master Naturalist and a driving force behind the many pollinator gardens in downtown Springfield and city parks. She is an enthusiastic volunteer at Lincoln Memorial Garden.

Helm generated significant funds for cancer research at the SIU School of Medicine through her leadership with the annual Denim and Diamonds fundraiser. She enjoys helping people with dementia and their caregivers through the Minds in Motion program, creating bi-monthly multi-sensory themed programs involving crafts, food, storytelling, music and more.

Whether through beautification projects, running events, fundraisers for cancer research or programs that promote health and wellness, Helm has enriched the lives of many people in the Springfield community.

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University, Helm's career involved public relations, marketing and event planning. She retired five years ago after serving many years as director of marketing for the SIU School of Medicine Department of Surgery. Helm was already an active volunteer while working; this has only intensified after her retirement.

Professionally, Helm is most proud of the Men's Night Out program she helped create. This fun event features a high-profile sports figure along with messages about men's health and free health screenings, attracting nearly 1,000 people annually. After retiring, Helm continued her leadership with the annual Denim and Diamonds fundraiser for cancer research. She co-chaired the event in 2019, raising \$320,000, the largest sum in the history of this popular event.

Helm does not shy away from hard work. She gets her hands dirty – literally and figuratively. Lincoln Memorial Garden is one of Helm's passions. Local residents can see and enjoy the fruits of her labor in the planters and gardens flourishing with native plants. She served on the board directors for six years and also leads nature hikes, helps with native plant sales and flips pancakes at the annual pancake breakfast.

She started running at the age of 49, going on to run half-marathons, pace others running a half-marathon and serving as a race director for eight years. When Helm directed the Women's Distance Festival, she added a women's health fair and kid's fun run. It was the largest in the history of this race, with 600 women and 200 children participating.

Her most ambitious project at Lincoln Memorial Garden was to create an 8K trail run. Fellow board member Nicky Stratton says this is an example of the management skills and enthusiasm that Helm brings to any challenge she accepts. She identified the jobs, found the right people and organized them into an efficient working team. Helm directed the trail race for six years, which raised funds for Lincoln Memorial Garden while also attracting new people to experience and enjoy the garden.

Colleagues who have worked with Helm say she is not a person who proposes a wonderful idea and then waits for someone to take up the challenge. Rather, she is a remarkable leader who is adept at engaging others within her sphere of influence to make things happen. Fellow

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE



Security Bank's
WOMEN
of Influence

Photo by Josh Catalano

volunteers know Helm to be fun and a team player. Although many projects wouldn't happen without her, she is quick to credit others and thank the many community partners who help make all the projects possible.

Helm was inspired to lead the Minds in Motion program for people with dementia and their caregivers after her own personal experience caring for her mother, who had Alzheimer's. Her mother, Rosemary Idleman, was always volunteering and helping others, and Helm says she and her four siblings grew up thinking that was the standard. Her mother continued that philosophy into her 80s and passed away at the age of 85 after several years with dementia. "Volunteering was a way of life for her," says Helm.

Helm is now an inspiration to her own children and grandchildren, just as her mother was for her.

RIKEESHA PHELON

By Lana Shovlin

Many people in Springfield recognize Rikeesha Phelon's name from her political work. After all, she worked as press secretary for the Illinois Senate during Governor Rod Blagojevich's impeachment trial, and it was there that she expertly managed interviews and media requests while navigating her way through one of the biggest challenges of her career. Phelon knew that she didn't want to spend her professional life defending actions that were out of line with her character, and she began looking for new career opportunities.

After stepping down from her position, Phelon then worked on John Cullerton's staff after his successful campaign for senate president, but despite loving her job, she began to feel the pressure of the legislature's infamously demanding schedule. With two small children at home and a busy husband, she began to wonder what other career paths were out there for her. Despite being successful in politics, she had always imagined herself in a position where she had the power to motivate large groups of people.

Bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, Phelon opened Phelon Public Strategies, a company that provided consultation to political clients and health care organizations in the Springfield and Chicago area.

"I started my business because I wanted to spend more time with my family, but my phone never stopped ringing," remembers Phelon. "It got to the point where I was going to have to start hiring employees and expanding my business, but I wasn't interested in that." Overwhelmed with the sense that her business was moving in an unexpected direction, Phelon applied for a job as executive director of marketing, communications and engagement at SIU School of Medicine.

Since beginning her career at SIU in 2018, Phelon has worked to develop an integrated marketing and communications plan to help tell the story of the impact that the medical school has on our community. She loves that the school's mission is to promote health care and produce great doctors that will have a positive impact on our community, but this past year has been challenging.

"Quite frankly, the pandemic has transformed the way we look at health care," says Phelon. Leading the organization, she has worked tirelessly on public awareness campaigns about the importance of social distancing, wearing a mask and washing your hands. Perhaps most importantly, she works alongside people of color who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Her goal is to make sure that they have a reason to trust health care professionals when it comes to vaccine confidence, and the timing of being the person in the position to provide this reassurance feels right.

Training and coaching people on public speaking has always been one of Phelon's passions, but this year, she realized that promoting public messages can be much more difficult than she imagined. "The truth is, we haven't been in a position where we've had to promote universal public health in a very long time," says Phelon. "We have messages coming out daily about how we need to do certain things for the common good, but we don't have the language, the experience of the infrastructure, to help people understand why that's important."

Not only are the messages sometimes polarizing, the way we relay those messages needs to change. Phelon is concerned that entire groups of people are unintentionally excluded from vital health information

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE



Security Bank's
WOMEN
of Influence

Photo by Josh Catalano

since not everyone has access to broadband or is tech-savvy.

"We just assumed that the message we wanted to get out worked for every single population. Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way," she says.

Phelon, along with other community leaders, has been working to learn how she can help craft messages about health care so that they are inclusive to everyone. She credits a lot of the changes that have been made to listening to what people need and understanding that factors such as ethnicity, age and gender all change the way that we receive information. Though some hurdles are still being addressed, Phelon feels encouraged by the progress that has been made, and she is trying to ensure that there are enough access points for people to receive health care information differently in the future.

"I've always believed that if you can change your community, you can change the world," says Phelon.

JULIE BENSON

By Carey Smith

Julie Benson's name has become well-known, often passed along to homeless or low-income residents needing assistance, or to those wishing to donate to assist in her mission. Five years ago, Benson formed a nonprofit called Helping the Homeless in Springfield. Her first task was to collect hats, coats, gloves and blankets, and drive around Springfield to give them to those living outside.

When she retired from her employment with Henson Robinson Company in 2019, instead of a customary parting gift such as an engraved watch, Benson received exactly what she wanted: a cargo van to help her ministry.

Benson says her work every day is different. The first of the month is spent acting as a representative payee for several people who receive Social Security benefits. After that, "I really go wherever the need is, any time randomly during the day when people call me and need me," states Benson. She branched out from her homeless ministry three years ago, adding low-income people with unmet needs to the people she helps every day.

She distributes leftover food from corporate luncheons, businesses and churches to help alleviate hunger in Springfield. Benson assists people in getting identification cards through the Secretary of State, distributes clothing and shoes, gives gas cards to working families, helps those looking for shelter and goes grocery shopping, often for grandmothers raising their grandchildren.

"I'm pretty much on call and do a lot of things. I wake up in the morning, and start getting texts for things people need," Benson says.

Benson admits her journey over the last five years has included some learning experiences, and she continues to learn every day. Above all, her aim is to help those in need, however she can. In addition to meeting needs for goods and services, Benson is also involved in several organizations with similar aims. She meets weekly via Zoom as part of a group called The Kitchen Table through the Heartland Continuum of Care. "We try to not duplicate services, but direct people to the right services. We reach out and make connections with people who are not connected," says Benson.

Benson also serves on a committee for the Family Guidance Center that helps get the word out about drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Last summer, she was tapped to supervise the City of Springfield's warming and cooling shelter, which had opened earlier in the year than usual to allow the homeless to shower. She expanded that to provide hygiene products, laundry services and even free haircuts from students at National Barber College in Taylorville.

As to her legacy, Benson states, "I think I've brought more awareness to the homeless community. When I started, there were a lot of people who told me they had no idea there were homeless people in Springfield, or more than just a handful of people." Benson feels she has helped to break the stereotypes. "Homeless people used to be frightening to people, and not so much anymore. Many more people will individually stop and help somebody than they did before. A lot will stop on street corners and get to know somebody. More people will give somebody a gift card to get food, or get them what they need. I think that I opened the community's eyes."

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE



Photo by Josh Catalano

Benson says she's humbled and stunned that she was chosen as one of this year's Women of Influence. "I hope that I can encourage other women to reach out and do something that can help their community. We can make a difference in peoples' lives if we show them respect, pay attention and listen."

In the coming years, Benson says she would like to see every single unsheltered person off the streets and into their own space with an opportunity to be safe and healthy and the ability to receive services, if needed. She hopes this can become a reality as awareness increases of our city's homeless population and the precariousness of its low-income residents.

"If we can do something, we should do something," says Benson.

Congratulations to the 2021 WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

From the Officers, Employees and Board of Directors of Security Bank

Julie Benson • Susan Helm • Rikeesha Phelon • Deb Sarsany • Lisa Clemmons Stott

“”

Security Bank recognizes this year's honorees for strengthening our professional community through volunteerism. Each honoree pivoted in an unprecedented year and continues to have a positive influence on others in Springfield and surrounding areas.

Stephan Paul Antonacci, President and CEO



Sarah J. Delano Pavlik
Attorney
Delano Law Offices



Nina Harris
Chief Executive Officer
Springfield Urban League



Emily Collins
VP, BSA &
Compliance Officer



Mary Ann Dunn
VP, Project Management
Corporate Secretary



Karen Hansen
VP, Human Resources



Rachel Johns
VP, Retail



Destiny Nance-Evans
VP, Sales & Marketing



Sheila Courville
AVP, Loan Processing



Tammy Gilchrese
AVP, Loan Processing



Security Bank is the founder and continuing sponsor of the Women of Influence program, which allows us to recognize area women for their outstanding contributions to our community. As a local bank with many female officers and directors, we are especially proud to recognize these women for their leadership, both in their professional and personal lives. Congratulations to this year's Women of Influence recipients.



**SECURITY
BANK**



Member
FDIC
EQUAL HOUSING
LENDER

#BankLocal
www.securitybk.com
217-789-3500