

OTHER VOICES

Women leaders needed for stronger community

By Sam Konduros and Ben Haskew

Gov. Nikki Haley and Chief Justice Jean Toal hold the highest positions of leadership for two branches of government in South Carolina, making a compelling statement about women as leaders. There are local examples of powerful leadership roles being filled by women, such as Greenville's chief of police, Terri Wilfong.

However, it is interesting to note that concurrently our state ranks 50th for the number of women elected to serve as a state senator or representative. This dichotomy shows both the progress that has been made as well as how much work still needs to be done in South Carolina to create an environment in which highly qualified women can move into top leadership positions.

Although still not the norm, there are outstanding examples of women business leaders in the corporate realm, such as Darla Moore, Catherine Heigel with Duke Energy or Pamela Lackey at AT&T. At the Greenville Chamber of Commerce, a small number of exceptional women have served with distinction as chair of

the board of directors at different critical intervals of the organization's 123-year history. While that record will be further strengthened when Luanne Runge, chair-elect of the Upstate's largest business organization, takes the leadership reins in 2013, it is more sporadic than it should be.

Through our association with Athena International, a nonprofit organization with global reach founded in 1982, the Greenville Chamber of Commerce has recognized and honored women in leadership with the Athena Award.

This prestigious award is presented at the Chamber's Annual Meeting to a woman who has exemplified professional excellence, community service, courageous acts, fierce advocacy, and other exceptional attributes that have demonstratively helped women realize their full potential. More than 500 communities worldwide participate annually in the Athena Award program, and many of those celebrated the Athena International Women's Leadership Day this past week.

Since 2001, Greenville's past Athena Award recipients include Pat Haskell-

GUEST COLUMN



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Robinson, Vivian Wong, Michelle Shain, Susan Lill, Chandra Dillard, Barbara League, Judith Prince, Minor Shaw, Susan Hoag and Diane Smock—all of whom have made significant contributions to Greenville in promoting community prosperity and quality of life.

In addition to recognizing women leaders through the Athena Award, the Chamber launched its Business Women in Action program in recent years to connect

and provide education to women professionals. There is a large pool of talented young professional women participating in PULSE, the Chamber's Young Professionals group. Class 38 of Leadership Greenville, the Chamber's community leadership development program for over three decades, is comprised of 50 percent women for the first time.

As Greenville continues to grow, data shows that there is an increasing

number of women-owned businesses. According to the most recent data available from the US Census, women-owned employer firms in the Greenville metro area totaled 1,771 in 2007, employing over 14,500 employees. Thousands more operate sole proprietorships with all women-owned firms having gross receipts of \$1.5 billion.

Going forward, the Greenville Chamber will continue to actively support talented women and minorities in our community in achieving leadership positions in greater numbers, and our community will be the chief beneficiary of those efforts.

As more women seek to build their leadership skills, the past recipients of the Athena Award in Greenville have proposed an innovative best-practice, executive women's leadership forum to raise awareness, increase capacity, and remove barriers for future women leaders. This initiative will require energy and commitment from employers, academic partners, and community groups to help mentor and move women through the pipeline of leadership.

The Chamber's board of directors has approved

a resolution to support this worthy effort, and our organization will collaborate with Athena Award recipients to benchmark high-impact programs across the country to determine what would work best in Greenville. Next steps in this collaborative effort will include developing a sustainability plan, identifying the levels of professional development needed which are not already being provided through other programs, establishing measures to gauge success, and linking the effort with stakeholders.

The Chamber salutes the extraordinary women of our community who help move Greenville forward through their effective leadership roles in the fields of business, law, medicine, academia, government, nonprofits and beyond. Leadership diversity is critical to the achievement of the Chamber's vision of Greenville becoming one of the premier business communities in the world.

The creation and ongoing support of a unique women's leadership initiative inspired and powered by recipients of the Athena Award will make us a stronger and better community for years to come.