

TITLE: Power Positions

Women at the helm of the Northwest's powerhouse companies

By Lisa Baker

A veritable tide of female leaders has taken the lead in Oregon's utility and communications boardrooms, wielding power once entrusted solely to the hands of men.

Women now head Portland General Electric, PacifiCorp and Qwest Communications, three influential utility companies all once helmed by men. Bonneville Power Administration's chief operating officer and one of its senior vice presidents are both women. In communications, Carolyn Chambers sits atop a Eugene-based media empire she created. Comcast's Western Division Vice President of Government Affairs is Debbie Luppold.

Clearly, it is a good time to be a career woman in Oregon.

BrainstormNW interviewed four of these Oregon executives about leadership in times of change, balancing home and work, and bearing the mantle of power with grace.

Peggy Fowler**President and CEO, Portland General Electric**

Talk about practical.

At 12, when other girls were practicing the art of tossing their hair, Peggy Fowler was thinking she might be a chemist.

True, there were a few minutes there when she flirted with the idea of pursuing music—she played the flute at the time. “But then I figured out I'd be poor if I did.”

As it happens, she figured out a lot of things that put her on the path to lead Portland General Electric through its most tumultuous years, through the collapse of PGE's parent company, Enron, to the current tug-of-war over its future ownership.

At the center of it all is Fowler's practicality and cool-headedness in the face of what others might consider crisis times. The kind of times that prompt her to advise young executive hopefuls not to overreact, not to panic. “Sleep on it,” she says, as if the panic-prone could conceive of such a thing.

She comes by it naturally, having been raised by Quaker parents who didn't tolerate nonsense but instilled both discipline and high expectations in their five children. Fowler is their youngest, having spent more time in books than dances and more weekends in church than at the local mall. She didn't participate in any sports until she was 30, she says.

Despite her deliberate ways, Fowler says she didn't envision herself at the head of a major corporation, but instead arrived there having wrung out all the learning in her previous jobs and having been simply ready for the next challenging thing.

And Oregon—its acceptance of women in leadership—is one reason there has always been a next thing, she says. “The Northwest is a great place for women. I thought about moving someplace else in the U.S. and looking at other electric utility companies, but this would have been harder to do in the south or the east.”

Because her husband is now retired and the children grown and on their own, Fowler says the corporate life is easier than it once was. “I sometimes wonder how I did it,” she says, looking back at the time when both she and her husband were full-timers and she was learning to be regional manager of PGE's Gresham division while at the same time learning to be a mom.

Although Fowler had been married before, she was new to motherhood, having married a man with two sons. But she was up to it. Up to the challenge of learning the new thing.

“When the boys were in school in Beaverton and I was driving to Gresham every day, we had to do it all one day at a time, deal with situations at work and situations at home in an organized, practical way.”

But she found that parenthood at times defied practicality. That some things just would not be controlled. “There were some things I could do something about and others I couldn't. I learned to let the other things go. And as I've gotten older, I've gotten more tolerant toward chaos.”

When work and home collided, home won. Hands down. Family, Fowler says, is first.

And she feels a similar pull on the job, where she says it is the people, the team, that keep her motivated. “If you're going to be in an executive position, you have to like people.”

You might also have to like long hours. Fowler spends up to 60 hours a week on the job, three or four days out of each month on a plane to somewhere else and takes work home as well. In her off hours, she dedicates time to the Oregon Business Council, Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon, SOLV Founders' Circle, Oregon Independent College Foundation and, with her husband Bob, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Portland.

It sounds like too much, but Fowler says she has found a balance between work and home that ensures she's enjoying her life rather than becoming enslaved to it. “There isn't any one thing that should drive you.”

As for the future, Fowler's dreams are not the stuff of tropical islands and utopia. “I would love to see PGE back to being publicly traded,” she says wistfully. And on the day, if it happens, that the company returns to Wall Street: “I want to ring the bell.”

Carolyn Chambers
Chairwoman and CEO, Chambers Communications Corp.

Other women bend over backwards to keep family life from seeping into their business sphere. Or vice versa. The fear: that they will seem somehow less serious about work. Too emotional. Too...girly. Or that their business life would somehow undercut their family relationships.

Carolyn Chambers has gone where they fear to tread, carefully blending the two things she is passionate about: family and business.

She's in her office at the Eugene-based Chambers Communications, a media empire that comprises a film and production studio, six television stations including KEZI-TV—the Eugene ABC affiliate—and a cable television system. A few feet away, her 5-year-old granddaughter watches television in grandma's office, one of two grandchildren practically raised on company grounds.

The business began in 1957 when Chambers, only four years out of college, invested in a single television station with a loan from her father, owner of a successful car dealership in Eugene. While most young women don't up and buy businesses right out of college, Chambers says, "It didn't occur to me that I couldn't, or shouldn't." It seemed, she said, like a good idea at the time, since the city had only one television station to its name. Her first husband, Don MacDonald, was one of the original investors.

Five children later, it was still a good idea, Chambers says, because being an owner allowed her the flexibility to work around the family's hours. Plenty of work got done at night when the children, aka "the Thundering Hoard," were in bed, she says. "I'm a night person anyway. I like the quiet."

Chambers' second husband, Dick Chambers, died in 1986. Now, all five children are grown and each is invested in the company, three in high-ranking jobs on staff and two on the company's board of directors.

Chambers' accomplishments have meant a bonanza for her favorite causes, especially her alma mater, the University of Oregon, and the Eugene arts community.

Despite her success, Chambers says she does not believe the time for women executives has arrived in Oregon, even though there is a current wave of female leadership. She says that while women have attained parity in other career fields, executive suites are still not as open to women as they are to men. Men continue to dominate those positions and "have a tendency to pick their own" when an executive opportunity comes up, she says. It is the passage of time that will balance the field in a permanent way, time during which many women are training for leadership. "Women are in all sorts of areas right now, working their way up," she says.

In the meantime, Chambers says, those climbing the rungs should ensure they keep some time to themselves rather than devote everything to career. In the end, it will save their sanity, she says.

At 73, Chambers still spends plenty of time at the office, but she is more often taking her own advice, tamping down on her hours so she can spend more time coaxing a second bloom from the orchids in her greenhouse. Gardening, like her business, started small but has multiplied to the point where the only answer is philanthropy. “I have to find ways to give plants away,” she says. In an admission that might fit her professional life as well as her horticultural talent, Chambers says, “I guess my thumb is fairly green.”

Debbie Luppold

Vice President of Government Affairs, Comcast, Western Division

Three cities in five days, on the plane, off the plane. Issues that swing from corporate training to lawsuit mediation to politics.

Thirteen thousand employees. Five million cable subscribers in five states.

But hey, no pressure.

And if there is, you’d never know from Debbie Luppold, Vice President of Government Affairs for Comcast’s western division, who says simply, “You get into the rhythm of it after awhile.”

Like the company’s heavily marketed cable Internet service, Luppold is both high-speed and ultra-connected—wired to go. And go. Her constant companions include a lightweight laptop with long-life battery, cell phone, and Blackberry, devices that keep her scheduled, connected and working wherever she is. Luppold is determined to squeeze every drop of productivity out of each minute.

Even when she has time to slow down, maybe get some reading in, she chooses a mystery novel “to keep me thinking,” a copy of *The Economist* or *Time* magazine. The closest her brain gets to a break is when the only reading material available is *People*. On an airplane, Luppold’s portable CD player is not cranking out music but instead “white noise.” She concedes that she has trouble stopping her mind.

The eighth of nine children, Luppold’s family is driven to hard work. Several of Luppold’s siblings are entrepreneurs. Others, now retired, remained loyal to their companies for many years, she says.

She believes the death of her parents 11 months apart in 1980 is what makes her so cognizant of the passage of time and the need to spend it completely and well. “It had a real dramatic impact on my life,” she says. “I made a decision at that point to see every day as a gift. You can’t assume you will have any do-overs.”

And so, she says, she does what she loves to do, not planning the next career move but instead “looking at opportunities as they present themselves and deciding whether it’s something I would love to do.”

It’s how she ended up in media, beginning with a job in the 1970s that placed her at the beginning of the video age, when immediate playback of video images became possible for the first time. Soon after, she found herself on the ground floor of multi-media experimentation and innovation. “I just fell in love with moving pictures and sound,” she says.

Luppold has moved from the edge of one envelope to the next, now finding herself at the frontier of telecom policy, where government attempts to catch up with the demands and opportunities of evolving technology.

Off the job, Luppold spends time at home with her partner of 25 years, Carole Smith, an alternative school administrator. “We go to movies and I like to putz around in the yard,” Luppold says. Having no children of her own, she dotes on her nieces and nephews. From time to time, she thinks about slowing down, much the same way she considers “migrating to decaf” or attempting yoga.

But all in all, she says she feels privileged to be where she is. “I have a wonderful life.”

Judy Pepler

Oregon President, Qwest

There’s nothing like slipping into the pilot’s seat just as rocket launchers target your engines.

It’s a feeling Judy Pepler knows well, having become Qwest president for Oregon as an avalanche of customer complaints hits the newspapers and a franchise dispute with the city of Portland erupts. “We were in the press regularly when I first came,” she says.

But there couldn’t have been a better time for the unsinkable Pepler, whose background blended phone company know-how with public relations savvy and an optimism that couldn’t have been more pronounced had she actually broken out in song.

And she could have.

Pepler’s past includes a stint with the song-and-dance show “Up with People,” which toured the U.S. and Europe in the 1980s, spreading a positive message about the value of people. The show led to her first opportunity to do promotions work—something that served her well in her career and afforded her a first glimpse of Oregon.

Like Debbie Luppold and Peggy Fowler, Pepler is the product of a large family that emphasized education. Her number: Fourth of eight.

She credits a summer job handing out bowling shoes with reinforcing the family's belief in the need for a good education. "Let's just say it inspired me to continue my education," she says.

She was recruited to Mountain Bell, a precursor to Qwest, while still in college and went to work as an installation supervisor in Boise, where her crew was comprised of 13 men with plenty of experience in phone company operations. Pepler, by contrast, didn't know the first thing about phone companies. The crew initially gave her a hard time but in the end, was willing to teach her what she needed to know. "I learned how you get a dial tone. It was great experience."

Her devotion to the job and the company led to a long series of promotions, and a decision.

On the one hand, Pepler was a rising executive in a major company. On the other, she was the mother of two young children. Someone had to be home. Pepler says she and her husband Randy, a former restaurant manager, "made a conscious decision" to pursue her career path rather than his. He would stay home with the boys.

It was, for its time, a revolutionary thing to do. "It wasn't common back then and it was fairly isolating for him because (housewives) don't invite the man over for the neighborhood coffee klatch." Now, the boys are 14 and 15 and, "Well, he does everything," Pepler says. "He cooks, he cleans, he does laundry. And it's great because on weekends we're not running around trying to get stuff done."

Having someone at home has allowed Pepler a free hand at her career, time to work longer hours if necessary, or travel to visit various corporate customers and government officials. "The hardest time was when we were just first trying it. Here I was the support of the whole family, and I was worried: What if I lose my job? I'm sure it's the same kind of pressure that men in that position feel. Some days you just want to switch places."

One of those times was when one of the boys fell and skinned his knees and promptly "ran to Daddy for a hug" rather than to her. But Pepler says incidents like that didn't make her change her mind about the decision. "I'm not hung up on roles. My husband is very engaged with the boys. I don't think, hey, I'm a woman so I should be doing it."

In a 60-hour week, Pepler relaxes not by putting her feet up, but by exercising—either at the gym across the street during lunch hour or in a morning walk with her husband. Free time finds the family boating or following the boys' interests, whether football and lacrosse or fencing and drums.

At long last, Pepler says she is "happy and content" at Qwest's Oregon helm and isn't aiming for another promotion. "Well, at least not for the next five years. But then, I wouldn't rule out politics later...maybe running for office."

