

CRE superheroes (who happen to be women): Texas pros share their tales of challenges met, successes won and ceilings busted

BY BRANDI SMITH



Susan Arledge
ESRP Real Estate



Brooke Armstrong
JLL



Melanie Edmundson, P.G.
Phase Engineering



Helena Finley, Houston
The Morgan Group



Amie Henry
Ladera Capital Partners



Yesenia Marili,
Transwestern

From the Metroplex to the bayous to Hill Country, women have used their experience, knowledge, insight and intuition to help shape Texas commercial real estate. This issue is a celebration of their collective achievements, as well as an opportunity to recognize their continued fight for equal footing in what has been a male-dominated industry for decades. Even today, women only account for roughly 37 percent of all professionals in CRE, according to a 2020 report by CREW.

“Women don’t see this as a career path,” says Susan Arledge, ESRP’s executive managing director of site selection. “They need to know this is a gender-blind industry. By that, I mean your career is driven by how much effort you want to put into it.”

REDNews connected with CRE pros from all over the state to learn their keys to success that will, hopefully, unlock doors for more women in the future.

The Location Leader

Susan Arledge, Dallas

ESRP - Executive Managing Director, Site Selection

“How do you stay in the business? You just have to live with the belief that it’s going to get easier and more profitable the longer you’re in,” laughed Arledge.

It’s something she says she had to believe wholeheartedly when she started in commercial real estate in the late ‘70s. Arledge had just left a job at an oil and gas company and landed a spot at Henry S. Miller, where she only knew of one other woman on the staff. She quickly learned her success would be dictated by how much she invested in it.



Edna Meyer-Nelson
The Richland Companies



Rhonda J. Sands, Houston
Veritex Community Bank

“You have to find that unique combination of someone who has drive, good self-esteem, self-discipline, someone who can take rejection over and over and over again without taking it personally,” Arledge said.

That mix of traits helped her find her way from industrial to office to what was then the pioneering idea of tenant representation. Arledge made a name for herself as a specialist in securing optimal locations for clients all over the globe.

“It’s an opportunity for women because it’s all about personal drive and personal self-discipline,” she said. “No one can take that away from you.”

Now executive managing director of site selection at ESRP in Dallas, Arledge said the company is committed to bringing more women into the industry. She wants to make sure they know there are opportunities in commercial real estate when they graduate from college.

“It’s all about awareness,” said Arledge. “We’re trying to make people aware that there’s a career path here with so much opportunity.”

The Tenant Tamer

Brooke Armstrong, Dallas

JLL - Managing Director

“In our business, it’s not if you get knocked down, but when,” said Brooke Armstrong. “The key is to get back up and brush yourself off every time.”

After 17 years in CRE, the leader of JLL’s Dallas Office Tenant Representation group knows that well. Armstrong attributes her longevity to her tenacity and a number of mentors who guided her throughout her career.

“The future is definitely brighter for women in this field than it was even ten years ago. We see many more women on site these days, not just in managerial or clerical roles, but in the trades as well.”

“Where do I begin? Roger Staubach, John Gates, Brad Selner, Elysia Ragusa, Carl Ewert, Steve Thelen, my dad,” she said. “I am incredibly blessed with people who have mentored me over the years.”

Though she doesn't recall many obstacles in her professional life, Armstrong admits she's often the only woman in the room.

“I consider that an opportunity rather than an obstacle,” she said. “I have the opportunity to make a difference.”

Armstrong acknowledges how much more diverse the industry has become over the years, but she points out there is a long way to go. To address the gender and racial imbalance in CRE, she suggests experienced veterans—women and men—need to engage in mentorship, sponsorship and advocacy.

“This is going to take a lot of intentional work from CRE leaders. We can't just look at the resumes that land on our desks, which tend to be from ‘friends and family,’” she said. “We have to seek out top talent of diverse backgrounds, hire them and advocate for them.”

The Environmental Entrepreneur

Melanie Edmundson, P.G.

Phase Engineering - Principal

“The longer you're in this business, the more you realize things just keep changing and evolving. You have to be constantly aware,” said Melanie Edmundson, principal and co-owner at Phase Engineering.

Edmundson, a Texas-licensed professional geoscientist, was the rare 1990s college graduate who went down the road of environmental consulting in CRE. Her first professional opportunity after college came from a Houston company whose president, a woman, wanted to provide opportunities for other women in her business. She gave Edmundson a job as a project manager at her environmental consulting firm.

“She said, ‘Look, you're smart, but there were nine other people who were smart too,’” recalled Edmundson.

She parlayed that opportunity, as well as those that followed, into learning experiences, a practice that hasn't stopped even though she has had her own business for more than 27 years.

“I feel like I am learning every day,” Edmundson said.

Listening is key, she stressed, for learning and for interacting with her clients.

“You need to hear their needs and be available to solve their issues when they really need you,” said Edmundson. “Let them know you're going to be there for them to help get their deal done and make it happen.”

Edmundson is grateful to all the women mentors along the way who offered advice and support, especially those who had to work even harder to break many barriers in the CRE business market before her. It's also important for those who are just starting out in the industry to listen, she encouraged, but they also need to be comfortable speaking up with their own creative ideas to help better the future for everyone.

“The majority of people in CRE are helpful and like to give advice if you just ask. Don't be shy,” Edmundson said. “Ask as many questions as you can because that's how you learn.”

The Construction Chief

Helena Finley, Houston

The Morgan Group - Senior Vice President of Construction Operations

Immense stamina. Mental toughness. Good decision making. Perfect strategy. Tremendous teamwork. Desire to be the best. Those qualities are needed for a winning adventure racing team, according to Helena Finley, an avid competitor who serves as senior vice president of construction operations for The Morgan Group. Those qualities are also assets for a successful CRE team.

“The nature of adventure racing means you never know what is coming next and need to be able to think very fast while moving quickly through tough terrain,” Finley said.

She tapped into her competitive spirit as a member of the South African national swim team. Recruited to swim for the University of Houston, Finley found a new place to call home, as well as a close group of friends in her teammates.

After college, she stumbled into the construction industry when she applied for an organizational position.

“I got hooked and love the industry,” Finley said.

More than 20 years into her career, she has watched as construction technology has rapidly changed, especially in the past five years. What has not changed as quickly is how few women are in the industry and how often they are underpaid

or overlooked for positions, but Finley said this is changing.

“The future is definitely brighter for women in this field than it was even ten years ago. We see many more women on site these days, not just in managerial or clerical roles, but in the trades as well,” said Finley. “The team I work with today at Morgan is a diverse group of men and women who all work really well together and support each other.”

The Money Maven

Amie Henry, Austin

Ladera Capital Partners - Chief Operating Officer

Success for Amie Henry is built not unlike one of the multifamily assets in which her firm, Ladera Capital Partners, invests. The foundation was laid in her first job with a Goldman Sachs company in Dallas, where she started as an analyst in multifamily asset management.

“Having that foundation early on enabled me to continually refine that knowledge working towards a greater level of expertise during each phase of my career,” said Ladera’s Chief Operating Officer.

The support structure came in the form of an invaluable network of industry colleagues to whom she could turn for advice and information.

“Within my network, I have developed close friendships with a group of successful women who are also some of my strongest proponents,” Henry said. “These women often provide that needed nudge and added support to step out of my comfort zone.”

Henry felt she really thrived in her career when she was working at firms that encouraged diversity and where women held leadership roles.

“It is exciting to now be in a position to shape the culture of Ladera Capital to match these ideals that have been proven to result in better performance and returns,” she said. “We have created a team that is diverse in a number of aspects, including race, gender, age and nationality.”

Henry encourages women considering a CRE career to research options and reach out to established professionals to benefit from their experience and knowledge about the industry to find a role that fits.

“CRE offers many avenues from which to choose a career path whether you are great at finance, marketing, sales, design, research,” she said, adding, “This is such a fun and diverse industry.”

The Social Media Maestro

Yesenia Marili, San Antonio

Transwestern - Vice President, Marketing & Research

“When I first worked in CRE, there was no social media being used in the industry,” said Yesenia Marili. “I got my first taste of social media during college through MySpace.”

These days, those social networks are an important part of how Marili, vice president of marketing and research for Transwestern San Antonio, helps her colleagues. It starts with two simple questions: Have you Googled yourself lately? What do you want those search results to say?

“This gets them thinking about what should pop up when you Google yourself and also what people, clients, coworkers, colleagues and the competition see,” Marili said. “They want to control what comes up.”

That’s where she comes in. Marili simplifies the process of leveraging existing platforms (company websites, blogs, written articles) for personal branding and success.

“LinkedIn is the platform that I push the hardest because it’s an individual opportunity to carve out territory online by creating exposure, connecting and engaging with potential clients and showing that we are experts by pushing and publishing thought leadership,” she said. “The internet is anyone’s game.”

She encourages joining a different kind of network for personal and professional growth, such as CREW. She joined CREW San Antonio in 2012 and now serves as the 2020 Chapter President.

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“Make the most of every interaction.
Be present, be intentional and be
your authentic self.”

CRE Superheroes

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In real life or the digital world, she stresses authenticity is key.

“From kindergarten, to high school, to college, to networking in college and professionally—every interaction, every person you come across in any meeting or networking event will potentially impact your career,” said Marili, who is the first of her family to graduate from high school and college. “Make the most of every interaction. Be present, be intentional and be your authentic self.”

The Ceiling Crusher

Edna Meyer-Nelson, Houston

The Richland Companies - Founder, President & Chief Executive Officer

“My grandfather gave me three choices. He said, ‘Either you go into real estate or you go into banking or you become a schoolteacher,’” recalled Edna Meyer-Nelson.

The Houston native chose banking until the Texas industry got deregulated in 1992, which brought in a wave of corporate buyouts. That’s when she decided to jump into real estate.

“Women do so well in real estate because women are detailed,” Meyer-Nelson said. “Men think of the big picture, but women are detail oriented, and they get details done. That helps a lot.”

Starting The Richland Companies in 1993, she had a leg up on some of her competition: the knowledge of how banking works and what loan officers were looking for in order to approve a proposal.

“I knew how to get money,” said Meyer-Nelson. “I’d been a banker. I wasn’t scared of bankers because I knew this: bankers don’t make money unless they loan money.”

She credits part of her success to that know-how, but also stresses the value of listening to clients.

“When you’re talking to someone, they’ll let you know if they prefer free rent, if they want a lower rental rate or if they need more money to do their build-out,” Meyer-Nelson explained. “Take that information and put it in your proposal to them. If you do, you’ll always stay leased up.”

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CRE Superheroes

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Recognizing how far women have come since she started in the industry, she said she prioritizes reaching out to young women who are interested in a CRE career.

“I speak at the University of Houston and Rice University on various occasions, but mentoring is important,” said Meyer-Nelson, who also has at least one student work in her office during the year. “I think that being able to mentor younger people has made a big difference in my life and the company’s innovative ideas for the future.”

The Banking Boss

Rhonda J. Sands, Houston

Veritex Community Bank - Executive Vice President

“When I started, some deals were structured on the back of a cocktail napkin,” said Rhonda Sands, executive vice president of Veritex Community Bank. “Now formal term sheets can be up to 100 pages based on the complexity of a deal.”

That’s not the only thing that she has watched evolve in the more than 30 years since she started working in commercial real estate.

“There are more women in the industry, however there are still few women

leaders,” Sands said. “What has changed is the ability for women to influence policies and procedures even if they don’t have the title. I think that is a good thing.”

She suggested women interested in CRE develop skills that allow their suggestions and opinions to be heard, which may include knowing which battles to pick.

“If you don’t know the answer, don’t fake it,” said Sands. “It is much better to give the right answer than a fast one.”

That taps into one of the qualities she said is most important to have a successful career in CRE: integrity.

“That is one thing that someone cannot take away. You don’t lose integrity, you give it away,” Sands said, adding that humility and relatability are also assets.

“Remember that no one is successful by themselves. I have been successful in building long-term relationships with all levels of staffing at prospects, clients and center of influences which leads to a broad and deep network.”

A network is one you should start building early, she encouraged, along with an education about the market and each client or project.

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