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Past glass ceiling to silver screen

Ten women heading local institutions and governments tell their stories on film.

By ALEXANDRA ZAYAS
Published March 23, 2007

TAMPA - Never before in Hillsborough County and Tampa history have this many women been in charge. A local documentary screened Thursday at Centro Asturiano shows that the climb wasn't easy for the title *Ten at the Top* in Tampa Bay.

When she became county administrator, Pat Bean's male co-workers threw money in a pool to see how long she'd last. "All of that is very funny now," Bean said. "Because, of course, all of them are gone."

Before she became clerk of the circuit court, Pat Frank was told by a Georgetown law professor that she'd never make it through his class. She was the first woman ever to attend the school. He told her "We haven't had a woman here since 1789, and we're not having a woman now."

And before she became mayor, Pam Iorio's boss at the University of South Florida's Small Business Development Center was taken aback when she said at 25 years old that she was quitting to run for the County Commission. "I think he thought I was completely out of it," she said on film.

She and Bill Manck had a great relationship, but he was "incredulous" at the news she was quitting to run for office, she said Thursday. He stared at her briefly, saying nothing, she said, then "just walked out and left me sitting there."

Producer Renee Warmack said she hopes the film will provide advice to groom today's girls to be tomorrow's leaders.

The 42-year-old holds a masters degree from USF in public administration and is a manager of special projects for the Children's Board of Hillsborough County. She noticed how many women were the highest-ranked leaders in local government.

Warmack said she called historian and author Doris Weatherford to ask if anyone had ever written a book or made a film about the top women. When the historian told her no one had, she decided she'd do it herself.

Though Warmack had never made a film, she dipped into her retirement funds to create the movie with sponsors and a film crew.

Teenagers with the Ophelia Project helped her select questions to ask the 10 leaders. They wanted to know what obstacles the women faced, and what their first rungs were on the ladder to the top.

Four fourth-graders from Seminole Heights Elementary helped, too, by talking on the film about their own aspirations. They sat on the floor ahead of the front row Thursday. When their scene came up on the screen, they hid their faces in their T-shirts, bashful and excited.

Sydney Hooper, 10, said she wants to be a professional athlete when she grows up. Kendra Knight, 10, wants to be a teacher, and Genesis Puryear, 10, wants to be a doctor.

Shalya Davis, 9, learned a lesson from watching the documentary: "You can't let boys stop you."

Warmack said girls today have mentors to help them aim high. "When I was little, I didn't know I could be mayor," she said.

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[Times photo: Julia Kumari Drapkin]

First-time filmmaker Renee Warmack, second from left, poses triumphantly with author Fawn Germer, left, at the premiere of Warmack's documentary, *Ten at the Top* in Tampa Bay. The film profiles 10 women heading government institutions in Tampa and Hillsborough County, including Julianne Holt, center, Pat Bean, second from right, and Luanne Panacek, right.

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Dr. Gwendolyn Stephenson's goal as a little girl was to get one year of college, like her mother. Now, she is president of Hillsborough Community College.

On film, she sums up her feelings on the emergence of local women leaders: "It's about time, isn't it?"

Alexandra Zayas can be reached at 813 226-3354 or azayas@sptimes.com.

Fast Facts:

'Ten at the Top in Tampa Bay'

The film will premiere at 4 p.m. Sunday on WEDU, West Central Florida's PBS station. It also will be part of the Ybor Film Festival of the Moving Image on April 22.

Pat Bean, county administrator, Hillsborough County.

MaryEllen Elia, superintendent, School District of Hillsborough County.

Pat Frank, clerk of the circuit court, 13th Judicial Circuit.

Nancy Fryrear, postmaster, Tampa, U.S. Postal Service.

Julianne Holt, public defender, 13th Judicial Circuit.

Pam Iorio, mayor, city of Tampa.

Dr. Luanne Panacek, chief executive officer, Children's Board of Hillsborough County.

Dr. Gwendolyn Stephenson, president, Hillsborough Community College.

Dr. Judy Genshaft, president, University of South Florida.

Col. Margaret Woodward, commander, 6th Air Mobility Wing and Installation, MacDill Air Force Base.

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