

## VIEW FROM THE TOP



**5 WOMEN CEOs REFLECT ON  
CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER AND WHAT IT TAKES  
TO LEAD THEIR COMPANIES**

**BY KEN SCHACHTER**  
*kenneth.schachter@newsday.com*

Climbing the corporate ladder toward the corner office requires resilience, team-building and a little help from your friends, say women who occupy the boss' chair on Long Island.

Women hold the CEO title at only 6 percent of the 50 largest

public companies by revenue currently based on Long Island, according to preliminary Newsday data.

That's roughly in line with nationwide data showing halting growth in the number of women who lead Fortune 500 companies.

A record 6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs were women in

2017, according to the Pew Research Center; their number dropped to 5 percent in 2018. Still, that's progress from 1995 when females had zero representation on the Fortune listing of the top U.S. public and private companies by revenue.

Women CEOs remain a distinct minority at private companies as well.

Kevin Law, president and CEO of the Long Island Association, the region's largest business group, said private enterprise is behind the public sector in providing advancement for women.

Law cited women serving as Nassau County executive and district attorney, and leading the towns of Hempstead and

Islip as well as heading economic development for Nassau and Suffolk.

"The private sector needs to catch up," he said.

Behind the statistics, however, is a new wave of female executives, five of whom are profiled here. They are breaking the gen-

**See CEO on A36**

# WOMEN IN CHARGE

Five top executives share their challenges and rewards

## CEO from A35

der barrier at Long Island companies and establishing a beachhead for the next generation.

One executive weighed an offer to become interim CEO just a week after landing at a billion-dollar company. Another

got the top job after the incumbent CEO was ousted in a proxy fight. A third created her own opportunity to lead by founding a company.

However they arrived, these women CEOs say it's all about projecting leadership and enhancing growth.

## LINDA PERNEAU

**Title:** CEO, president and director at Volt Information Sciences Inc. in Uniondale

**Age:** 53

**CEO since:** June 2018

**Employees:** 1,500

**Revenue:** \$1.04 billion

**Advice she gives:**

"Don't let anything get in your way. Act as if you have the job. Never give up."

**Best advice she got:**

"There are no bad armies, just bad generals."



LINDA ROSIER

Perneau spent years pursuing career advancement in the staffing business, in one stretch moving her family 10 times in 11 years.

But when she joined global staffing company Volt Information Sciences as president of its North American staffing unit on May 29, Perneau had no idea that a week later she would be CEO.

"I was just meeting folks and getting acclimated to the organization," she said of her first days at the company. "The board called me in and let me know they'd made a leadership change."

When the board of directors offered her the job, she did not flinch.

Perneau accepted and called her husband afterward. "It was a whirlwind first week."

She had been groomed for more than two decades as an executive at Adecco, Randstad, Kelly Services and other staffing companies before taking the

helm at Volt, which oversees about 18,600 workers on contingent staffing assignments.

Perneau was tapped to turn around a company that had seen revenue drop from \$2.1 billion in 2013 to \$1.04 billion in the fiscal year ended Oct. 28.

"The best thing about the job so far has been watching the complete culture shift within the organization," she said. "We've been seeing positive growth. People walk around the building and have that pride back. It's very refreshing."

Perneau said she motivates the troops by "explaining the why." She also believes in pushing employees "outside their comfort zones" just as her mentors did to her.

She said she understands that not every business decision will work.

"My motto is: Fail quickly," she said. "We take smart, calculated risks . . . We're all going to win together. We're all going to fail together." — KEN SCHACHTER

## HELENA R. SANTOS

**Title:** CEO, president, director, treasurer, chief financial and accounting officer at Scientific Industries Inc. in Bohemia

**Age:** 54

**CEO since:** 2002

**Employees:** 35

**Revenue:** \$8.5 million

**Advice she gives to others who aspire to the C-suite:**

"When the opportunity presents itself, go for it."

**Best advice she got:**

"Stick to what you believe in."

In 2002, a proxy battle pitted the board of Scientific Industries, a maker of mixers, shakers and incubators used by scientists, against the incumbent CEO, Lowell A. Kleiman, who also was a major shareholder.

In August of that year, board members brought Santos, then a 38-year-old accountant who had been serving as Scientific Industries' vice president, controller and secretary, to a club in Manhattan.

They asked Santos, who had joined the Bohemia company eight years earlier, if she would take the CEO job.

"I had a loyalty to the CEO and president, but I saw this as an opportunity that I'd have in front of me only once," she said.

Santos, a first-generation immigrant who was 9 when her parents moved to the United States from a town about 60 miles from Lisbon, sought to build "a team with the right talent"

and set a "tone at the top."

"I like to lead by example, and it's important to surround yourself with good people," she said. "Because I'm a hands-on person and I listen to people and have an open-door policy, I'm respected."

These days, Scientific Industries has about 35 employees. In the quarter ended Dec. 31, the company posted revenue of \$2.2 million and reversed a net loss in the year-earlier quarter.

Even as CEO of a public company, Santos said she is not afraid to get her hands dirty.

"I'm loading up some product in the back of my car, and I'm setting up the booth," she said as she prepared to go to a trade show in Philadelphia earlier this month. — KEN SCHACHTER



VERONIQUE LOUIS



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## MONICA BHASIN

**Title:** Founder, owner and laboratory director of Health Level One Inc. in Hauppauge

**Age:** 46

**Top executive since:** 2008

**Employees:** 13

**Revenue:** \$3 million to \$3.5 million

**Advice she gives:** “Be prepared to work hard . . . Forty hours a week doesn’t cut it” when you’re launching a business. And “financial gain should be your last priority. You have to believe in what you’re doing, that it’s the only thing for you to do.”

**Best advice she got:** Diversify your customer base (which she only did after losing her largest customer last year).

Bhasin worked as a chemist for several vitamin and drug manufacturers on Long Island before starting Health Level One. She came here from India in 1997.

“I didn’t want to stay on someone else’s payroll,” she said. “I had faith in my ability to do well. I had the skills set and was prepared for hard work and sacrifice. It

seemed the only thing to do.”

As the top executive at Health Level One, which tests the purity and potency of vitamins and dietary supplements, Bhasin said she’s “gentle with my people but firm. I have reasonable expectations. I believe we have to grow together, to look after each other, to respect each other.”

Bhasin said she expects employees to make sound judgments. “You have a degree, use your brain,” she said.

To motivate employees, Bhasin said she treats them “as colleagues rather than as employees.”

What’s the toughest thing about owning a business? “Every obstacle is my headache, my problem alone,” Bhasin said. “At a big company problems are distributed; at a small company they are consolidated with the owner. Who is worrying about the problem but me?” she said.

Still, “there’s a real sense of accomplishment when you start a company and it grows . . . it’s an unbelievable feeling,” Bhasin said. Her success has allowed her to take flying lessons and purchase a single-engine airplane, which she said she hopes someday to use in charity work.

— JAMES T. MADORE

## RUTH E. HENNESSEY

**Title:** President, Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center in West Islip

**Age:** 61

**Top executive since:** December 2018

**Employees:** 3,300

**Revenue:** \$715 million

**Advice she gives:**

“Pursue your passion”

**Best advice she got:**

“Always work with the physicians. At times in my career I have seen administrators ignore the physician’s voice or not ask.”

At multiple stops in her career, Hennessey saw major medical projects planned without proper input from physicians. That “mistake,” as she called it, helped shape her organizational and leadership skills.

“We offer medical services to patients in a network,” Hennessey said. “How do you create bold medical programs without working on details with physicians? I’ve seen it happen a few times, and, quite frankly, it has never worked out.”

She started her career as a nursing assistant, and became passionate about the “complex operational systems that . . . make a hospital function.”

Hennessey joined Catholic Health Services in 2004, where she said she has pushed collaboration and communication.

“I . . . feel that you must over-communicate,” she said. With seven executives reporting directly to her and a staff of 3,300, it’s important to make



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sure “the higher levels of the hospital communicate with middle management . . . and middle management translates that message for the rest of the staff.”

That includes sharing regular updates on progress and failures, she said. “It is important to identify failures when they happen and learn from your mistakes.”

Hennessey said the adage “It’s lonely at the top” is sometimes true. As you move up the ladder, “you can find yourself alone in your views and opinions,” she said. “A large part of advancing as a leader is to take risks both privately and publicly for something that you believe in.”

— DAVID REICH-HALE

## TERESA FERRARO

**Title:** President and CEO of East/West Industries Inc. in Ronkonkoma

**Age:** 57

**CEO since:** 2012

**Employees:** 85

**Revenue:** More than \$10 million

**Advice she gives:** “Gain all the knowledge that you can and that will give you the support of others as you climb up the ladder.”

**Best advice she got:** Her father told her, “You never have to show that you are the smartest person in the room; if you are listening, you will be the smartest person in the room.”

Ferraro likes to say that East/West manufactures military equipment that saves lives.

As a subcontractor to companies like Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, the firm designs and makes emergency survival kits with oxygen systems and “crashworthy seats” that aircrews use when they need to take extreme measures to stay alive, like ejecting from an aircraft.

“Our equipment needs to work right the first time,” she said. “There are no second chances.”

Ferraro, the second generation to run a company her parents founded in 1968, said she was inspired to join the family business after a pilot and co-pilot who successfully ejected from their aircraft visited the company “to shake the hands of every man and woman that saves lives,” she said. “It was life-changing for me.”

But it was no picnic being the boss’



BOB GIGLIONE

daughter. She said she had to fight against stereotypes of being privileged because of her parentage. And very few women were in the industry at the time.

“So I have definitely had my struggles over the years,” she said.

After getting her bachelor’s in business administration from Adelphi University in 1984, she took it upon herself to learn all aspects of the company such as human resources, accounting, government contracts and purchasing.

She moved up the ladder by “understanding each job and each person’s value to the company.”

And she said, “Once you have earned the respect of your co-workers, your voice is more powerfully heard within the group.”

— CARRIE MASON-DRAFFEN