



In the News

Sandra Steen & Associates, Inc.

Walking the Walk:

Four Who Live for Diversity

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The little girl would grow up to travel the world and share its global similarities. But first she'd have to grow out of a back yard in East Side San Antonio.

Nora Mae Polk wouldn't let anything get in the way of her granddaughter. Including her granddaughter.

"My grandmother wouldn't let me think that I couldn't do it because I was a female or black," says Sandra Steen from her high-rise office on the city's Northeast Side. "If you believe you can do it, you can do it. You just keep moving ahead. There's nothing stopping me but me."

Steen's motivational philosophy has catapulted her consulting business to a major playing field. Sandra Steen & Associates, now in its seventh year, helps Wal-Mart, SeaWorld of Texas, Frost Bank and other Fortune 500 companies across the globe embrace the idea of an ideal work environment.

Steen's philosophy spins on the cog of diversity. Essentially, employees from across borders are motivated to cross the borders in their minds and hearts for a better work environment.

"Companies now have to make a business decision that if they're not inclusive, they might not get the best," says Steen. "But valuing diversity is an issue of the heart. It still comes down to the individual."

Steen says the challenge of finding labor – in San Antonio in general – is forcing the issue of diversity in the workplace. And that discomfort is a good thing.

"Pain is one of the greatest ways to bring about diversity," she says. "Say you're in the hospital and you're in great pain. Do you really care about the packaging of the nurse with the anti-pain pill?"

"Our firm deals with the philosophy that I can't start teaching you to value everybody until you value yourself," says Steen. "When it comes to that individual celebration of the differences, we still have some work to do. We have to love variety as much as God does."

One thing Steen won't preach is what she calls "entitlement thinking."

"Sometimes the mentality is, 'I need to step into a career and I don't have to pay my dues,'" says Steen. "That perpetuates a glass ceiling that's not really there. True, there is not always an equal playing field. As a black female, I've seen that. But most of it is what we bring to the table."

"Diversity is not affirmative action. It's not about counting heads — it's about making heads count."

Steen is convinced hard work pays off regardless of who you are. A graduate from Brackenridge High School, Steen's self-esteem – and high marks – landed her enough scholarships and other financial aid for a trip to Southern Methodist University.

That "go get 'em" mentality soon took her out of post-collegiate managerial positions and into the entrepreneurial field. Ironically, Steen's dreams took her back to the back yard. In May 1993, she set up shop for her consulting firm on her aunt's back porch.

Since then, the self-described "all-purpose girl" has traveled to Australia, Europe and just about every state in corporate America. The backyard business is now an executive setup in the city's Tesoro building.

As for where her job will take her next, Steen just hopes more businesses – and people – will truly think global and act local.

"The workplace has to foster self-fulfillment," she says. "That means meaningful work and a meaningful company. People aren't just looking for jobs anymore. They're looking for meaningful work."