

Glass-ceiling breakers push networking, taking risks



Mona Shield Payne

Mae Douglas, center, senior vice president of Cox Communications, entertains fellow panelists, from left, Cynthia Kiser Murphey president and chief operating officer of New York-New York, and Doris Charles, regional president of Wells Fargo Bank, while participating in a panel discussion Aug. 16 at the Women of Color conference at Mandalay Bay.

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Cynthia Kiser Murphey's biggest challenge as an executive with MGM Resorts International also produced the opportunity that led to her current position — president and chief operating officer of New York-New York.

In the months leading up to the approval of gaming in Detroit in the mid-1990s, the wife of one of MGM's top executives there became ill and the executive took an extended leave to tend to

his wife, leaving the company without a key voice in the debate. Kiser Murphey, at the time a human resources vice president, was asked to pinch hit.

“I had never been to Michigan, and this happened at a time when there were all kinds of stereotypes about gaming that we were trying to dispel,” she told nearly 200 people at a panel at the Women of Color conference Aug. 16.

Although faced with the challenge of balancing work and family, she agreed to the Detroit assignment and commuted from Las Vegas with her young son until he was old enough to attend kindergarten.

MGM executives took notice of Kiser Murphey’s dedication and promoted her to the New York-New York position during a shuffling of executives in 2008.

Kiser Murphey’s story about taking on a challenge was one of several at the panel on shattering the glass ceiling at the two-day conference at Mandalay Bay.

The Women of Color conference, first held in 2007, is a collaboration by the Women’s, Asian, Latin, Urban and American Indian chambers of commerce. MGM, Cox Communications and IBM Corp. are the primary sponsors, and In Business Las Vegas has a smaller sponsorship role.

Pursuing education and internships, getting advice from a mentor, networking with other professionals and taking occasional risks when pursuing career goals were common themes among the four panelists.

“I had a successful 20-year career in another industry, but got burned out with it and it led to a perfect opportunity at Cox (Communications),” said Mae Douglas, vice president and chief people officer. “I networked with people, and one connection led to another. When I first began, I took a salary cut, but it was important to me to find work that I was going to enjoy.”

Doris Charles, a regional president with Wells Fargo Bank in Southern Nevada, said she climbed the corporate ladder by learning everything she could about every department within the banks she worked.

“Sometimes I had to take a step backward and make judgments on my own that I wasn’t ready for certain positions,” said Charles, who started her banking career as a part-time teller.

While working at smaller banks that were acquired by larger ones, she occasionally had to take demotions when a new owner took over, but because she worked hard to learn about all departments, she quickly rose through the ranks.

Delia de la Vara, vice president of the strategic communications group of the California region of the National Council of La Raza, volunteered her time at demonstrations as part of her networking. She said she envisioned a goal early and took steps toward reaching it.

Kiser Murphey also had to take chances early on to achieve her career goals.

She said she helped open a restaurant as a teenager in Kansas and learned from the experience that she wanted to be in the hospitality industry. She made a decision to attend UNLV, which her family regarded as a bad move since all her friends were staying close to home.

But UNLV and Las Vegas offered plenty of learning experiences outside the classroom, and Kiser Murphey took advantage of internships and hands-on opportunities.

After working at the Las Vegas Hilton, Kiser Murphey got a big opportunity in 1989 when she was hired to be on the human resources opening team at the Mirage.

“You have to go after the things that interest you,” she said. “I didn’t just do it to get ahead. I did it because I was passionate about it.”