

A Trailblazer and “the Only Girl in the Room” Charlene Hamrah, Class Of 1969



Pictured is Charlene Hamrah and the “boys’ club” in the 1980s.

As a shy high school student in the 1960s, Charlene Hamrah had not given much thought to the idea of attending college. She was interested in the business world and planned to apply to a secretarial school. However, she took a different path, becoming a trailblazer in what was then the male-dominated field of business, at a time when men referred to women as “girls.”

Her mother’s influence and encouragement convinced Hamrah to have a bolder vision for her life. “She insisted that I go to college,” recalls Hamrah. At Caldwell College for Women, she majored in business and minored in education. “There were only five business majors in my graduating class, but the campus was close-knit and very social; I made many friendships I’ve maintained to this day.” She blossomed in the nurturing environment at Caldwell and began to think seriously about her future.

After graduating, Hamrah found a position as a business teacher. Although she asked

to teach bookkeeping and more advanced business courses, she was assigned the typing and shorthand classes on the theory that she was “a better role model for girls.” Hamrah found teaching skill subjects dull and uninspiring, and this provided the impetus for her to make a career change. In her second year of teaching, and for more than three years while working full time, she commuted to Rutgers-Newark for evening classes, earning an MBA with a concentration in finance in 1975. It was, she says, an exercise in endurance—and a bit lonely since she was the only woman in many of her classes. At the time, women averaged 10 percent of MBA enrollments nationally. Today, women represent more than 40 percent of MBA students, thanks to pioneers like Hamrah.

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Charlene Hamrah on a recent trip to the Grand Canyon.

She landed a job in New York City as secretary to the financial officer of a small commercial insurance company and continued to travel to Newark for evening classes. When Hamrah completed her MBA, she moved into a supervisory position and eventually became the vice president for financial planning and analysis at that company. This once-shy young woman had found her voice and had secured her place as a leader. In 1989, while in her early 40s, she took on a new challenge: the role of motherhood, when she adopted her son, Damon. After the premature death of her husband, Hamrah became the single working mother of a young child.

As her confidence grew, Hamrah was undaunted by the challenge of being the only woman in “the boys’ club.” Her male



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counterparts acknowledged her intellect, work ethic, and determination; she earned promotions, although not as quickly as the men, and was frustrated by the inequity in her compensation. Her advice for today’s students: “Stay focused and get the job done, go the extra mile, do not be afraid to ask questions, and ask for help when you need it. If you want more responsibility, ask for it—and for the salary that goes with the job.”

The next chapter of her career took Hamrah to Wall Street when she joined AIG, a global giant in the insurance and financial services industry. Promoted through the ranks, she took on numerous roles in finance and accounting, eventually leading the investor relations department. She later became one of the few female officers at the firm, reaching the pinnacle of her career as vice president and director of investor relations. “It was both an internal and external relations position. I guess I wasn’t shy any longer,” Hamrah says with a laugh. As the key contact for institutional investors, she was responsible for reporting financial results, explaining and answering questions about those results, and meeting with investors to explain the company’s operations and opportunities. It was not a job for the faint of heart.

Was there a point at which she finally felt acknowledged by the men with whom she worked? “When the then-CEO of AIG named me corporate vice president,” she says. “On one hand, I felt I deserved it long before that day; on the other hand, I was thrilled. Perhaps most important to me is that the CEO was known as one of the toughest bosses in corporate America, yet he liked and respected me.”

Over the years, Hamrah has remained connected to Caldwell and is “very impressed by what has been accomplished in the past decade and by the students I have met... The campus has changed and enrollment is increasing, but it still has the close community spirit that I loved as a student. The Sisters of St. Dominic

deserve credit for taking the bold step of admitting men and expanding the academic programs,” she adds, “and Dr. Nancy Blattner’s vision and leadership have brought Caldwell into an exciting new era.”

Caldwell remains a touchstone in Hamrah’s life. She has made a generous leadership gift to the Campaign for Caldwell and serves as co-chair of the campaign steering committee alongside Elaine Tweedus ’66. In anticipation of her 50th class reunion in the fall of 2019, Hamrah is working with a group of her classmates to conduct outreach and hopes for a great turnout.

“As I look back on my life’s journey,” she says, “I am most struck by my transformation from a shy, quiet girl with a narrow worldview to a confident business executive who embraced opportunities and traveled the world, making many friends along the way. I will be forever grateful to Caldwell for helping me develop a foundation for success—in my career and in many other areas of my life.” ■

—Christina Hall

