

## Carla Altepeter, MBA '98, keynote speaker at Celebration of Women

by Sheryl Hanson - Tuesday, April 08, 2008

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/710/carla-alepeter-mba-98-keynote-speaker-at-celebration-of-women/>

The eighth-annual Celebration of Women was held on the campus of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh April 2.

Four women received Celebration of Women awards: Rosa Alvarez, Malissa Bonlender, Rosemary Smith and Jennifer Bugni-Walsh.

Carla Altepeter, MBA '98, presented the keynote speech. Altepeter is president/CEO of CitizensFirst Credit Union and also serves on the UW Oshkosh Foundation Board of Directors.

Altepeter spoke of her climb to a management role in banking, a primarily male-dominated industry, and of those who inspired her to persevere through her many trials.

The entire text of her speech is below:

“Good Morning.

“It is a pleasure to be at an event which honors and celebrates women. As I began thinking about this speech, I decided to do a little research about women’s firsts in history.

“In the Christian tradition, Easter was recently celebrated. If you read the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24 you will see that the first people to witness the Easter event, that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, were 3 women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. Sadly, there seems to be a glass ceiling in religion, as well as in business, as these women are rarely recognized for their role of being the first witnesses to the resurrection!

“During my research I found some other entries interesting as well.

“In 1795 – Anne Parrish establishes, in Philadelphia, the House of Industry, the first charitable organization for women in America.

“In 1849 – Elizabeth Blackwell receives her M.D. degree from the Medical Institution of Geneva, NY, becoming the first female physician in the U.S.

“In 1869 – Arabella Mansfield is granted admission to practice law in Iowa, making her the first female lawyer.

“In 1889, Jane Addams and her associates opened Hull House in Chicago. It was as a welfare agency for needy families and worked to combat juvenile delinquency by providing recreational facilities for

children living in slums. Later she became the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her humanitarian efforts.

“In 1902 -- Since there was no women's competition for figure skating, skater Madge Si-yers of Britain entered the men's world figure skating championships and places second.

“In 1908, she would win the first women's Olympic gold medal. ”In 1916 – Jeannette Rankin, of Montana, is the first woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

“In 1925 – Nellie Taylor Ross becomes the first woman to serve as governor of a state, in Wyoming.

“In 1931 – Virne Mitchell, a baseball pitcher, becomes the first woman in professional baseball. She strikes out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in an exhibition game. Later that year, the Baseball Commissioner bans women from the sport.

“In 1932 – 16 years after the first woman was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, Hattie Wyatt Caraway, of Arkansas became the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate. I guess the U.S. Senate is a little slower at the draw.

“In 1967 -- Muriel "Mickey" Siebert became the first woman to purchase a seat on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE). For ten years she was the only female among its over 1,300 members.

“In 1969 – Shirley Chisholm of New York became the first African American woman in Congress. Her motto “Unbought and unbossed.” Yeah, well, those were the good ole days.

“In 1981 – Sandra Day O’Connor is appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court making her its first woman justice.

“In 1997 – Madeleine Albright is sworn in as U.S. Secretary of State. The first women in this position as well as the highest ranking woman in U.S. Government.

“In 2007 – Harvard University names Drew Gilpin Foust its first female president in the school’s 371-year history. It took them 371 years????!!

“These are just some of the many examples of women who succeeded in unchartered territories. I’ll bet if we looked more closely at their stories, they would be filled with hardships and roadblocks. Yet they pressed on to achieve their goals and by doing so paved the way for other women. And, I am sure, their stories have inspired countless other women to overcome what seem to be impossible obstacles.

“My personal story includes obstacles and roadblocks as well, but ultimately triumph and accomplishment. And, interestingly, I owe my success to three unknown, somewhat ordinary, yet very special women.

“As you were told, I am the President and CEO of CitizensFirst Credit Union. Incidentally, the first woman CEO in its history. The credit union industry, similar to the banking industry, is dominated by men. This is changing, but too slowly, in my opinion.

“During my nearly 30 years in the credit union industry I have found myself constantly in situations outnumbered by men; and at times I have been the only woman in a given situation. I have been challenged to prove myself to men over and over again to get my voice heard, to influence change and receive promotions up through the ranks to ultimately reach the level that I am at today. And I have been fortunate to have worked with and learned from some really outstanding, forward thinking men who have encouraged and supported me. Though, none so influential as the three women: Betty, my mother; Jeanette, a woman who was a mentor to me early in my career; and Ruth.

“First, about my late mother, Betty. I now realize that my mother was a wonderful role model for a strong work ethic. She went to work after my younger brother started school and always worked to excel in a career she absolutely loved. She was an executive assistant. She prided herself on typing fast, 125 words per minute, being able to anticipate the needs of her boss and others, and helping to make her boss “shine.” She went to work every day no matter what and could be completely relied upon to do her job very well. I learned about the importance of a strong work ethic from my mother. A woman can not be successful in business without it.

“I started out in credit unions at the age 17 working as a teller. At about age 20, I started to ponder what I wanted to do with my career. I was already married and had been working full-time since graduating from high school. I decided that I wanted to become a CEO of a large credit union by the age of 35. Looking back, I was really naïve. Here I was 20 years old, without a college education; I had hated school; I had no supervisory training, no public speaking experience, and I was going to be a CEO by age 35. Yeah, right!! I was even told by men in the business to forget it because “women don’t become CEOs of large credit unions.” But I pressed on. With the help of my friend and mentor, Jeanette, I made a list of the skill sets and experience I needed to become a CEO; and then I began working on those things, checking off each skill or experience as I achieved it. And Jeanette was there to support me 100%. She was already in management. She took me under her wing and taught me all about office politics and the dos and don’t of management.

“Then, when I was 22, my first child, Ashley, came along, quite unexpectedly. I contemplated quitting work, but we really couldn’t afford that. Somehow I found out about Ruth; Grandma Ruth as my girls affectionately called her. I know now that Ruth was a gift from God, so that I could press on and reach my goal. Ruth was a Kentucky farm girl. Her mission in life was to raise a family and take care of her home. She didn’t drive, and after her kids were grown she took care of other women’s children so that they could work. Grandma Ruth loved my girls, and they loved her. Because Grandma Ruth took care of my girls, I could work and attend college. I became a non-traditional student, attending school while working full time and raising two children. I remember the obstacles to completing my degree, such as study hours beginning at 2 in the morning so that I wouldn’t take time away from my kids or writing papers with a 3 year old on my lap. But I pressed on, overcoming obstacles and completing my Bachelors and then my Masters degrees in Business Administration.

“I came to Oshkosh in 1992 to become CEO of CitizensFirst, then known as Wisconsin Axle. I was 32 years old at the time – I made it, 3 years ahead of my goal!

“I believe my adult life is an example of the power of women. I know that I couldn’t have achieved what I did in my career, and in my life, without my mom, Jeanette and Grandma Ruth. They’re strong women who left their imprint on my life and, in my heart. Because I benefited from their modeling, mentoring

and support, I have made it one of my missions to help other women and girls be the best they can be.

“Perhaps my most important role is as a mother, raising my two girls to be strong and independent and guiding them as they finish college and begin to launch their own careers. My daughter, Ashley, has a masters degree in Professional Accounting and just last week, she learned that she passed the CPA exams. My daughter, Rhianna, is student teaching in her last semester of college. She wants to become an elementary teacher and she will be fabulous! My daughters, each so very different and yet both so strong and determined.

“I also do my best to support the women at CitizensFirst so that they can honor their family responsibilities and be successful at work.

“Other ways that I have tried to support women are: Through my involvement as a founding member of Tempo Fox Valley, an organization of professional women leaders; its genesis was driven by the need for executive level women in Oshkosh to have a network of colleagues with which to discuss pertinent issues and refer business. Tempo Fox Valley sole purpose is to support and mentor women in business, it does no community service or fundraising;

“Other ways I try to support women is by getting involved in our community and by lending my voice to through volunteering on non-profit Boards and committees, such as the Boys and Girls Club, the Women Foundation, Chamco, Affinity Health Systems and the UWO Foundation Board of Directors.

“And, one of my passions in life, leading mission teams to help bring hope to women and children in third world countries, such as Nicaragua, Bolivia and Uganda. It is my dream to someday expand this work and help women in third world countries develop micro-enterprises to they can provide for themselves and their children. It is a well known fact that if you employ women they will feed their children and with enough resources, they will ensure their children get an education – which, ultimately, will end the chain of poverty. This is the fundamental power of women and the reason we are celebrating women today.

“I want to encourage each and every one of you to capitalize on this power of women. Though throughout the years women have made major advancements, we still have a long way to go.

“An article in Sunday’s Wall Street Journal suggests that “women’s progress in the workplace has stalled or even regressed.” According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2007, women earned a median weekly wage of 80.2 cents for every dollar earned by men; down from 81 cents in 2005. The article goes on to say that in Fortune 500 companies, women hold 50% of manager positions, and hold just 15.4% of senior executive jobs, down from 16.4% in 2005. Of those same companies only 12 have women CEOs or presidents.

“Women are strong; we approach situations, problems and opportunities from a different perspective than men. We tend to treat people with compassion, tend to be nurturers, and tend to work collaboratively vs. competitively. I believe we need to harness this strength, this power of women, working to prop each other up. To support women’s advancement to leadership positions in our communities, in non-profits, in corporations and in institutes of higher learning. As women, when we work hard, do our best in our chosen field and press on to overcome obstacles and advance in our careers, we collectively work to break down the glass ceiling for all women; thereby making more opportunities for women and making

our world a better place. I would like to leave you with a couple of wonderful quotes by Eleanor Roosevelt, who in her own right, was one of the most influential women in American History.

“Her first quote: ‘You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face... You must do the thing which you think you can not do.’

“And, perhaps my favorite: “A woman is like a tea bag: You never know her strength until you drop her in hot water.”

“Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today and share my story.”