

# Building Upon the Foundation of the Past

Caryn Hacker-Buechel looks at the genesis and growth of female leadership.

To write a column honoring this month's 'trailblazers and leaders' caused a visual cavalcade of short snippets of historical events to appear as video vignettes in my mind. Beginning in the present and then moving backward through my imagination, I saw my immigrant, seamstress grandmother who ate onion sandwiches because it was the only English word she knew. I visualized our country, torn apart by civil war, comforted by a courageous president who knitted it back together by ripping apart the concepts of slavery. I imagined the brave Spanish explorers, in wooden ships and unyielding conditions, battered by the seas as they

"discovered" a new land and became leaders towards our future. Lastly, I felt the many Native Americans who dwelled in our country and were the first to "trailblaze" this beautiful, unspoiled landscape. They, as all the others, are our connected family.

The trailblazers we recognize this month offer their talents and insights to a community rich with the history, wisdom and paths of those who came before. Each breath of insight, birth of invention or persuasion of spirit occurs on the foundation of someone else's home. Every intellectual cellular advancement, communal



## ENVISIONING SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S FIRST TRAILBLAZERS

It was particularly hot that season. I walked quietly along the white-sand shores, grateful for the occasional times that the blue waters climbed a bit farther up the sandy slope and kissed the soles of my bare feet. I looked out upon the waters, hoping to see my tribe's courageous men and their proud cypress canoes returning from a day at sea, palm-nets full with fish and faces bursting with stories, ready to be told over that night's food and fire. In that moment, the sky-blue waters were empty of people, but full of wild life. Not too far from shore, a green turtle gracefully appeared, raised its head toward the sun, rested a moment, and then silently disappeared before the birth of the next wave. Two dolphins played nearby, so close that I heard the rush of air through the hole in their backs, even over the sound of the waves and the water. Near the shore, a group of small silver fish jumped, as if dancing, as a young alligator waddled out of the tall grass, slithered off the beach and into the sea. I was

not afraid, because I am Calusa and we are a 'fierce people'. Nearly 50,000 of us call this land (South Florida) home. I gather white shells from the beach from which we make tools for cooking and hunting. We add mud-clay and make 'shell mounds' (a type of dwelling). My sisters and I search and dive for oysters, lobster and conch for dinner, which my mother prepares. At 12 years of age, I have learned how to weave cloth from palm fronds and grasses and make palm coverings for our dwellings, which have no walls and are built on stilts. I can also make colorful clothes. But right now, I walk this wet land and am amazed at its beauty. The blue of the sky melts into the water's edge. The sea rhythmically offers itself to the sand, to bring new colors, from white to brown. The sand pushes to the long green grasses, and becomes marsh, full of brown peat. This mixture of sand, swamp and sea is my home and the home of my people... and I am a proud Calusa.

synchronicity of purpose, or global theoretical innovation has its origin in the efforts of those that struggled at the outset. To honor the present is to honor the past.

Certainly we know that the road to leadership has not been an easy one for womankind. That is not to say, however, that there are not tribes, families or businesses that honor and cherish matriarchal history and female direction. Navajo families continue to honor the wisdom of the grandmother and Xerox, Rite Aid and Sunoco appear to be flourishing with female CEOs at their helms. In general, however, the road to leadership has been more difficult for women. "...But the times, they are a-changin'..."

Alan Keith of Genentech stated that "leadership is ultimately about creating a way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen." Social scientists have, therefore, studied the most common leadership styles and characteristics, which have been utilized throughout history primarily, of course, by men. The authoritarian, autocratic, narcissistic and toxic leadership styles have been shown to be ineffective in creating unity and group cohesion. Presently, they favor a participative, democratic and communicative style of leadership; strength tempered with kindness.

It has been shown (Caliper, 2005) that women leaders are more persuasive than their male counterparts, learn from their adversaries, demonstrate an inclusive, team-building leadership style and are more likely to ignore rules and take risks. The characteristics necessary to create healthy families are now being recognized as important and paramount in forming strong and resilient businesses and organizations.

As we celebrate this month's honorees, their strides, commitment, integrity and vision, we also rejoice in the past. Every step leads to the next. Let us all encourage our family, friends, children and ourselves to build upon the dreams of the believers that came before us and through us to cosmically guide us to the future.

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