



Eileen Connolly Robbins

Victorious Woman - April 2010

Goddess of Reinvention

“Get me another cup,” the condescending boss demanded as he slammed his coffee mug on the secretary’s desk. Something inside young Eileen Connolly snapped. “This isn’t *me*,” she silently screamed and vowed, “I’m *never* going to fill up anybody else’s mug again.”

Now, more than thirty years later, Eileen says that day was a turning point in her life. That moment made her realize she wasn’t satisfied with the direction her life was going. It began a personal revolution and a series of reinventions that took Eileen Connolly Robbins from secretary to corporate executive to entrepreneurial mom and now non-profit COO. Eileen’s journey put her on the front lines of feminism and took her around the world and back again.

Growing up in Havertown, Pennsylvania, a middle-class suburb west of Philadelphia, Eileen was headstrong, adventurous and fun-loving. During her childhood, the feminist movement was still merely a subversive rumble and the social message to young women like Eileen was clear: *good girls don’t make waves*. But Eileen’s father told her that the secret to success was hard work. There was nothing she couldn’t do if she was willing to work hard enough for it. She really believed it...*and in herself*. His advice lit the fire that ignited Eileen’s drive to be the best.

When she was just sixteen, Eileen convinced the owner of a small real estate company to hire her for a summer secretarial position, even though Eileen knew she could barely type. Remembering those days, she laughingly confesses, “I brought a big pocketbook with me and would put all the mistakes in my bag and threw them out when I got home. Since my typing was so slow, I would come in early and work through lunch to get the work done. Then I would go home and practice typing every night for hours. Within a month my typing improved...and I could leave my big pocketbook home.”

Later that year, the business owner asked to Eileen to come back during the holidays and then again the following summer. Her experiences whet her appetite for learning more about contracts and government regulations. More importantly, Eileen discovered that “viewing an obstacle as a challenge can, with hard work and determination, lead to success.” Her teenage victory was the foundation for many more successes.

A few years later, when Eileen decided to lead her life in a new direction, that teenage lesson, and her father’s advice, fueled her first reinvention. Working for the General Electric Company, Eileen looked around at the people who were getting ahead. She realized they were educated men who “had a diverse background including experience in each area of operations.” So she developed a long range strategic plan for herself. First she enrolled in night classes to finish college. In spite of financial constraints and frequent coast-to-coast business travel, Eileen got her degree. Then she attended as many corporate leadership training programs as she could and also took every opportunity to get ahead in her job - even if she didn’t like all the positions or had to relocate and “was paid a lot less” than men similar work responsibilities.

During those earlier years, Eileen experienced resistance from those who didn’t think a woman could do certain jobs or be an effective manager. But she refused to accept it. Eileen made a point to talk to her superiors about her career. She let them know that she had clear goals, was willing to work hard to achieve them and then made sure her performance reflected that of an up and coming leader. “There was no doubt I had to work a lot harder than my male counterparts to gain the same recognition,” Eileen acknowledges, “but hard work and endurance won out. My superiors eventually did not see me as a female. They saw a business leader that was going to help them achieve their goals, make them look good and on whom they knew they could rely.”

Rung by rung, department after department, Eileen climbed GE’s corporate ladder. She didn’t just learn what a department did; she also learned how they did it. Eileen’s willingness to demonstrate and share her knowledge about each department’s operation got her noticed by and into upper management. She was sought-after for her experience and, when offered, accepted the same position with another top company, Unisys. As the Director of Global Operations for their government contracts, she was the chief negotiator on international projects, negotiating with companies in Europe and Asia; Eileen was the first woman at Unisys

to shoulder those responsibilities. Her ability to negotiate government contracts got her a reputation – both within her company and throughout the industry. She traveled overseas on business and even worked for extended periods in Japan. Over time Eileen became the corporation's highest paid woman.

Eventually, however, the extended overseas travel lost its excitement and Eileen got bored. She was ready for a new challenge and decided to reinvent herself as an entrepreneur. Eileen developed another strategic plan that included setting aside money for a couple years of living expenses. She researched business opportunities in the geographic area near her home. When she decided to start PA Gifts and Awards, she also became a pioneer in doing business on the internet garnering the coveted "Five Star Rating" from Yahoo. Eileen learned that her corporate experience gave her an edge. She saw her new endeavor as an extension of the corporate world, except "everything was on a smaller scale."

During those years, Eileen's personal life took several twists and turns. First, she fell in love. Then, while on business in Las Vegas, she and her sweetheart made a spur of the moment decision and got married. Later on, when her aging mother needed care, Eileen became the primary caregiver until the end of her mother's life. And then Eileen met one of her greatest challenges: her spouse's three young grandchildren came to live with them. Assessing the situation, they decided to seek custody. The court process required multiple adjustments, including moving to another home. Suddenly, and without a strategic plan in place, Eileen became a full-time working mom – a reinvention Eileen never anticipated!

When finally Eileen adjusted to the changes in her personal life, and after twelve years of successfully expanding her business, Eileen was ready for yet another reinvention. She didn't know exactly what she wanted to do but was active with her local chamber of commerce, serving first as a board member and then as board chairperson. As a volunteer Eileen learned about, and started to like, aspects of the non-profit world. When Eileen's business sold, she was offered the opportunity to become the chamber's Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. It was going to be a real challenge, and she loved the idea. She took the job.

Once in her new position, Eileen again relied on past experience, understanding that whether "non profit or for profit, a company should be managed the same way. They need processes, policies, procedures, budgets and consistent financial reporting." Assessing the chamber, she made recommendations and then began making changes. During her first year, Eileen helped the chamber reinvent itself by revamping its operations. Next, in the spirit of mentoring and believing "women are willing to learn from each other," she made a venue for women to meet. In May 2009, Eileen extended the chamber's new success by launching the Main Line Society of Professional Women. From its first meeting, and spite of an economic recession, SPW meetings have not only been well-attended, they are usually sold out.

What's Eileen's advice to women like you who want to reinvent themselves or their careers?

- Develop a strategic plan for yourself both personal or professionally. Then make a "Plan B" so if you ever feel disillusioned, you'll always know Plan B is ready, if needed.
- Make your career goals known to the people who can help you. Don't think you will just wait your turn and you will get that promotion....you have to make your career goals known to your employers - and back it up with performance.
- Find a mentor. In both corporations where I was employed and now in non-profit, I've had mentors who were invaluable to me then and I still use strategies they taught me.
- Be willing to move out of your comfort zones and change. If you are not willing to change now and then, I believe you will be destined to remain unfulfilled.
- Always be willing to help someone – don't forget you were there once...

*Eileen, on behalf of every woman who has the desire to reinvent her life,
Congratulations and thank you for showing us the way!
You modeled how it's done, proving that each of us can do the same
...over and over again...*

And be happier and more soul-satisfied because of it!

Learn more about Eileen's Society of Professional Women at <http://www.spwmainline.com>