

SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL



DELINDA FORSYTHE

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BUSINESS WOMEN
of the year awards 2023
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD HONOREE

DeLinda Forsythe Receives SDBJ Lifetime Achievement Award

NONPROFITS: Business Founder, Author, Cause San Diego Leader Honored

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

"Doing well and doing good need not and should not be mutually exclusive."

More than just the opening statement in the Introduction to the 2022 book "Inspiring Generational Leadership: Your Guide to Design a Conscious Culture," a No. 1 best seller with Amazon, it's at the core of what the book's author — retired business owner, conscious capitalist and inspirational leader **DeLinda Forsythe** — eats, breathes and prays.

Forsythe has forged her path to success in the business sector and volunteer world with a purpose-driven life in which she serves family, friends and colleagues; champions women at every opportunity; and is a shepherd in generationally focused mentoring.

Her guiding principles of faith and leadership by words and deeds paved the path for Forsythe to receive the San Diego Business Journal's 2023 "Business Women of the Year Lifetime Achievement Award."

"I never expected to receive a Lifetime Achievement award," said Forsythe, 66, founder of **Innovative Commercial Environments**, a contract furniture industry company she sold in 2022. "This is the greatest career honor I'll ever receive, and coming at the end of my career is poetic!"

Former San Diego Business Journal Publisher **Barb Chodos** said that Forsythe will tell you there is nothing special or unique about her; that anyone can accomplish what's she's accomplished.

"In many ways she is correct — she is an everyday woman accomplishing common things but in a very uncommon and generous manner," Chodos said. "And that is what is so charming about her life; it's attainable to anyone who wants to make a difference in their community and company. What is exceptional about her is how deeply she cares about others, especially women."

Born **DeLinda Ottomeyer**, Forsythe trained in ballet as a youth and was a touring dance artist early in her life. But after a few years, life on the road no longer moved her in the ways she wanted.

Forsythe left the arts and moved to a completely different line of work — selling office furniture. She began that part of her career in 1987 and spent nearly two decades in office/workplace interior sales before founding **Innovative Commercial Environments (ICE)** in 2006.

She laughed as she called herself "The Accidental Entrepreneur."



Early Days as a Single Mother

ICE was built when she was a single mom — to guarantee that her son, **Alexander Orna**, would be able to reach his educational goals. Orna graduated from **Georgetown University**, earned a **Fulbright Scholarship**, attended the **University of Cambridge** for his PhD and earned a master's degree at **University of California San Diego**.

"I knew it was going to be a long road ahead and he was not going to be able to reach any of his educational dreams unless I took a chance and became an entrepreneur," Forsythe said.

She also wanted to create an emotionally safe workplace — one she'd always imagined, but never experienced.

She said she had been dating **Tom Forsythe** — her husband since 2009 — for about a year when she started her business.

"I was 49 when I started ICE and with his promise to cover my \$1,400 a month mortgage if I couldn't, I found the courage to start ICE," Forsythe said. "The

first month I made the same amount of money I had in the previous year and I never had to take him up on that offer, but it made me realize the importance of advocacy for others."

ICE was on the **Inc. 5000** Fastest Growing Companies seven times, in part because of Forsythe's decision to partner with millennial co-workers. No other furniture dealership has accomplished this and only 1.5% of all U.S. companies have been on this prestigious list seven times.

In addition to this measurable success as a small business entrepreneur, **DeLinda** has a long legacy of mentorship supporting female business colleagues. She also has found success in philanthropy.

In retirement she serves as the **Co-Executive Director** for the **Cause Conference**, a visionary effort to share the stories of San Diego and global leaders that lead purpose-driven, heart-centered, financially successful companies to inspire and educate local business leaders.

Forsythe said that at this year's sold-out conference, more than 60 local and national social entrepreneurs shared stories of how they

Voices for DeLinda



Alyse Cooper, President of ICE: "She introduced me to the right people, shared with me the value of networking and relationships and what it actually takes to build them, and always stressed the importance of giving back. Giving back can mean so many things, but for her it was the donation of time and money not just to charities but to anyone who was in need. She has always been extremely generous with her time meeting with anyone who asked to help and mentor them as well. I try to model my efforts after hers."



Sandra Pelletier, CEO of Evofem: "As two female CEOs in San Diego, what strikes me in a profound way about **DeLinda Forsythe** is her unwavering and exuberant support of other female leaders at every level. Her approach in supporting other women is all encompassing whether it is mentoring, being a sounding board, providing emotional support or opening her contact list. It is important that I share she is also a strong advocate for professional equity and her support transfers to male colleagues as well. **DeLinda** is unafraid to cross boundaries and ask minute questions beyond superficial nicety. As a peer, she is a leader that can be counted on to be brutally honest, consciously caring and will have your back."



Staci Reidinger, Founder Reidinger PR and Co-Executive Director Cause Conference: "No matter the challenges or hardships set before **DeLinda**, she's steadfast in her Christian faith and devotion to following God's path. She's one of the bravest, hard core women I've ever worked with and that's saying a lot considering I'm a 24-year U.S. Marine Corps veteran. I'd have **DeLinda** join me in my foxhole anytime because when she sets her mind to something, she puts all her energy into making it a success."



Laura Hall, Conscious Capitalism: "DeLinda was one of the first San Diego business women who welcomed me with open arms when I moved permanently to San Diego during the pandemic after spending most of my time in New York City, with holidays and summers in San Diego due to my career in the fashion industry. We had connected previously through the Conscious Capitalism movement and it was wonderful to have someone in San Diego who felt the same way I did about business. I was honored to be included in her book in a small way... and **DeLinda** is credited in my mind with a fabulous quote: "One woman can do anything. But women together can do everything.""



Barb Chodos, former SDBJ President & Publisher: "What is exceptional about **DeLinda** is how deeply she cares about others, especially women. One of the biggest challenges for both of us is that women continue to compete and marginalize each other in ways that hold our gender back. Women will not make significant strides in the workforce and in the world until women stop seeing each other as competition and start realizing we are allied. **DeLinda** goes through life with no catchers mitt at all, keeping both hands open to give unconditionally, even to competitors. That is no doubt her superpower. Sharing love and her Rolodex unconditionally! She is a role model for us all."

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use their businesses as a force for good, "resulting in extraordinary societal and financial results."

"In 2020, 29 million 'Boomers' retired and by 2030, 75 million more will have retired, so it's not only important to understand what motivates a younger workforce, it has also become a business imperative," she said.

Forsythe said her dream is for San Diego to earn the designation and brand of having the most conscious business enterprises in America, and attracting the best companies and talent to our region.

Inspirational Leadership with a Cause

Staci Reidinger, founder of Reidinger PR and Co-Executive Director of the Cause Conference, said Forsythe has been an inspiration to co-lead with.

"Her passion for helping to improve the lives of people in our San Diego region shines through the volunteer leadership position she held this year at our 25th Annual San Diego Cause Conference," Reidinger said. "Her book focused on presenting the business reasons for creating an inclusive company culture and for the importance of mentoring our future leaders."

Forsythe has a lifetime of caring deeply for others and practicing simple common kindness and generosity in an uncommon way, but says, "It's something anyone can do but few make that effort," she said.

She said that she loves what author and inspirational business leadership speaker Simon Sinek says: that leaders need to further develop young people, "that our responsibility as leaders is to take these young people and shape them. And not just to view them from a self-serving lens of 'What can you produce and do for me?' but 'What can I -- as your leader -- do for you?'"

Some of Forsythe's support and heart for others is rooted in a family history that includes her mother being a World War II survivor of Nazi enslavement.

"As a Christian, yes, she was a slave, and she had to work in a factory," Forsythe said. "She was only seven when the Nazis took her."

Her mother, Annette Munska, was born in Poland and taken by the Nazi regime to work in a munitions factory. Unable to locate her family in the war's aftermath, Annette immigrated to America in search of a new life.

Forsythe said her mother encouraged her to "be brave, take chances and live life boldly."

In 2021, before her book launched, Forsythe said she reached out to Chodos at the SDBJ, to introduce herself and her book.

Chodos, now director of operations for the Greater Coachella Valley Chamber of Commerce, said she recalled the connection.

"Coming out of Covid, the SDBJ wanted to highlight entrepreneurial stories that inspired hope and optimism, and her book detailing the Conscious Capitalism

movement fit the profile," Chodos said. "In her fearless style, she 'cold-called' me one late Friday afternoon to personally drop off a copy of Inspiring Generational Leadership. I saw her through my office window and knew instantly that I wanted to connect with her. I had been reading her posts on LinkedIn and I was eager to learn more about how ICE inspired younger generations."

Forsythe said Chodos's encouragement absolutely helped her find her voice.

Faith Leads and Moves Her

At the heart and soul of what Forsythe has achieved and what she still aims to share with the world is her faith.

"Everything I've accomplished, everything I am, is because of my faith," Forsythe said. "And that faith is really important to me. It has directed me and is the reason I am the leader I am. I see people as somebody's precious child, not somebody I have power over, but somebody I share power with."

Reidinger said she has seen that no matter the challenges or hardships set before Forsythe, "she's steadfast in her Christian faith and devotion to following God's path."

Reidinger, a 24-year U.S. Marine Corps veteran, said "I'd have DeLinda join me in my foxhole anytime because when she sets her mind to something, she puts all her energy into making it a success."

In 2022, Forsythe sold ICE to one of her longest-tenured employees, Alysse Cooper. Cooper, now president of ICE, has been an employee since 2008 when she was 21 and a full-time college student.

"DeLinda took a huge chance on me not having any experience in the commercial furniture industry, and quickly began mentoring me, although I couldn't have realized it at the time," Cooper said. "As the years went on, she spent more and more time with me until our relationship bloomed into an obvious mentor/mentee relationship. Fast forward 15 years and I have since purchased ICE from her which could never have been done without her belief in my potential, her continuous support and coaching and the trust we have in one another."

"DeLinda is someone that shaped who I am today and I would never be in the position I am in had she not believed in me, mentored me and given me an opportunity."

Cooper continues to model many of her leadership skills after Forsythe. ICE has nearly wrapped up its first year with Cooper as owner "and our team has not skipped a beat," seamlessly achieving its company goals, Cooper said.

The team is stronger than ever due in a big way to the foundation Forsythe helped to build and the values she instilled through the years, Cooper said.

She said Forsythe has always been "extremely generous with her time," meeting with anyone who asked for help and mentoring them as well.



Forsythe multitasking at work, with son, Alex, circa 1986 in Phoenix. Photo courtesy DeLinda Forsythe



Forsythe, Alysse Cooper and Tom Forsythe at Cooper's wedding in 2008



Nathan Hevey, director of the documentary "Beyond Zero," Forsythe and Carlos de la Mora, the CEO of the World Design Capital at the 2023 Cause San Diego Conference

Voices for DeLinda



Sharrieta Williams, Senior Project Coordinator, ICE:

"DeLinda has created a safe working space where it's OK to voice your opinion without concern about being judged and without worry about your job being jeopardized just for speaking up about what you believe in. ICE has also given me confidence in myself to be able to do so. I never felt like I had a voice or the immense support of my coworkers at a place of employment before working at ICE."



Cheryl Kilmer, CEO and Founder, TER1, Inc.:

"DeLinda is an example of servant leadership in every area of her life, giving with joy. In her book she shared a wonderful story of ICE's seven to eight years of volunteer work with our organization, TER1. The ICE team partnered with her church during their annual Community Serve Day, providing maintenance on one of our private TER1 homes. They volunteered countless hours as well as funds. It was great to learn more about their TER1 journey in her book "Inspiring Generational Leadership." DeLinda is currently providing pro-bono design experience and ideation work for the new TER1 Campus of Life. She brought in an A++ team and it's been a total joy to have her as part of my consulting team."



Kim Folsom, Founder, Chair & CEO, Founders First Capital Partners:

"DeLinda is such a great role model of courageous leadership. She is always willing to contribute her time, talent and resources to advance impact. I started Founders First Capital Partners in 2015, to be the first mission-driven, revenue-based investor focused on serving under-funded—but growth-minded—diverse-led small businesses in the San Diego region and beyond... (At our San Diego Bootcamp) Fitch events... she has provided sage advice, inspiration and recognition to hundreds of these small business owners. They are owed by her openness to share her business expertise and entrepreneurial journey, as they share their stories of hope and dreams to expand their businesses. This event is so important to the growth of our entrepreneurs and we appreciate DeLinda's commitment to provide her ancestral expertise as a successful entrepreneur. DeLinda clearly has a heart for helping motivate others!"



Alexander J. Orona, Director of Data Science, Ocean Motion Technologies:

"It was an inspiration seeing my mother build her company from a spare bedroom into a leading business in San Diego. She did it without any capital or external investment, a testament to the power of vision, hard work and the entrepreneurial spirit. She has always been someone who pays it forward. After selling the company, she passed on her insights in "Inspiring Generational Leadership." Over the years, she has overcome many challenges as an entrepreneur and business woman, which she has borne with dignity and integrity. She is someone of immense character. Our family has long been proud of her for who she is and what she has achieved, as have many in the community who know the challenges that she has had to overcome. The Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes a career of resilience, empathy, vision and sacrifice. She is an example to me and to many others of how to build a life worth living. You're a real inspiration, mom. Thank you and congratulations!"



ICE team 2022 holiday party at Forsythe residence in Fallbrook. Photos courtesy DeLinda Forsythe



Forsythe (far left) at a staff celebration at ICE's office honoring the company as one of Inc.'s Best Places to Work in 2021

Mentorship at Every Turn

"Mentorship is not easy both from the mentor and the mentee side," Cooper said. "I think it's a trendy term today that many are seeking; however, few receive a true mentorship opportunity as I had with DeLinda. She was always available to me at all times of the day. I have fond memories of us driving home separately after networking events and she would stay on the phone with me until I got to my driveway recapping the nights events, explaining to me who certain people were and encouraging me to network with those I had met that evening."

Cooper said Forsythe observed her and provided feedback—whether she wanted it or not.

"That is actually critical in mentorship," Cooper said. "You cannot just tell someone what they want to hear or what they did well—that does not foster growth. True mentorship takes difficult conversations, consistent course corrections and DeLinda always provided that for me with a nice balance of compliments and building up my confidence. She introduced me to the right people, shared with me the value of building genuine relationships and what it actually takes to build them, and always stressed the importance of giving back."

Forsythe always looked toward future generations, thinking about what good leadership looks like and taking the time to bring the younger set up and give them opportunities to grow and succeed, Cooper said.

Forsythe captured her journey of generational advocacy and mentorship and the stories of other like-minded San Diego business leaders in "Inspiring Generational Leadership." The book details the measurable financial and societal success of designing a purpose-driven corporate culture that allows employees to thrive and reach their potential at work, as individuals and as parents.

The book is one that can be opened to any page or chapter and it will add value without needing to read the entire 280 pages, or in any specific order, says Sandra Pelletier, CEO of Evofem Biosciences, Inc., one of nine business associates interviewed in the book by Forsythe.

Not only does the book build a runway for the next generation of leaders, Pelletier says, it also "challenges seasoned leaders to think about their legacies differently and ignites us to unselfishly share real tips and techniques so others can avoid making the same mistakes."

In addition to advocating for the younger generation, Forsythe is also a fierce champion of women.

"It bothers me terribly that women compete with women, that women are envious of women, stunting the advancement of each other and our entire gender," Forsythe said. "How do we stop this? Because we have sisters, daughters, nieces, neighbors. It's time for women to encourage women to move into more positions of influence; let us have a go at significant leadership. Maybe there would be less violence."

Unwavering Support of Women, and Men

Pelletier said that what strikes her in a profound way about Forsythe is her unwavering and exuberant support of other female leaders at every level—and that Forsythe also champions men with similar enthusiasm.

"Her approach in supporting other women is all encompassing whether it is mentoring, being a sounding board, providing emotional support or opening her contact list," Pelletier said. "She is also a strong advocate for professional equity and her support transfers to male colleagues as well. DeLinda is unafraid

to cross boundaries and ask intimate questions beyond superficial nicety. As a peer, she is a leader that can be counted on to be brutally honest, consciously caring and will have your back."

On a more personal level, Pelletier said she deeply valued Forsythe's genuine empathy during her cancer treatment.

"She would stop and drop off a nurturing and nourishing homemade meal which brought her far out of her geographical way simply to let me know that I mattered," Pelletier said.

Forsythe is also a founding member of the Conscious Capitalism Inc. Senior Leader Network and is a Conscious Capitalism San Diego advisor. CCI is a nonprofit organization that is building a movement of business leaders seeking to build the practice and perception of capitalism to elevate humanity so people can flourish with lives of passion, purpose, love and creativity.

Pelletier said it would be a "gross understatement" to view Forsythe as simply a conscious capitalist and that "she is in fact a conscious game changer in every aspect of life."



Forsythe and granddaughter, Aubrey Cray with Forsythe's book "Inspiring Generational Leadership"

An 'Awe-Inspiring' Mission to Spread Joy

Laura Hall, co-chair of Conscious Capitalism San Diego and a partner at WHYZ Partners, has worked together with Forsythe to advance CCSD and Conscious Capitalism, Inc.

Hall provided a recommendation for Forsythe's book that included a call to "join us in this awe-inspiring and achievable mission to be beacons of light, change and joy!"

Hall said Forsythe was one of the first San Diego businesswomen who welcomed her with open arms when she moved permanently to San Diego during the pandemic. Hall had been spending most of her time in New York, with holidays and summers in San Diego, because of her career in the fashion industry.

"We had connected previously through the Conscious Capitalism movement and it was wonderful to have someone in San Diego who felt the same way I did about business," said Hall, author of the children's book "The ABCs of Conscious Capitalism for KIDS," which teaches the fundamentals of conscious capitalism.

"DeLinda is credited in my mind with a fabulous quote," Hall said. "One woman can change anything, but many women together can change everything." DeLinda has been and continues to be a strong positive force for good in San Diego. Her

receipt of the SDBJ Lifetime Achievement Award could not be more deserved and should be celebrated."

Forsythe also has a heart for nonprofit organizations and other groups seeking to work collaboratively for the betterment of the region, the nation and the world.

For 25 years, Forsythe served on nonprofit boards and committees, raising funds for organizations including the National Association for Industrial and Office Parks; Urban Land Institute; International Interior Design Association; the Training, Education and Resource Institute; Plant with Purpose; Athena; TranscendANCE Youth Arts; and as San Diego Economic Development Corporation Foundation Chair.

In her book, Forsythe included comments from Sharrice Williams, a senior project coordinator at ICE. Williams called her inclusion in Forsythe's book "terrifying."

"I was also extremely honored," Williams said. "And I say 'terrifying' only because I am not the type of person that likes to be in the spotlight. I'm very reserved. Never in a million years did I think anything I had to say would be so impactful that it would be published in a book. And that leads into how DeLinda has been a mentor to me."

"She has created a safe working space where it's OK to voice your opinion without concern about being judged and without worry about your job being jeopardized just for speaking up about what you believe in."

Williams said working for Forsythe and now Cooper at ICE has also given her a boost of confidence.

"I never felt like I had a voice or the immense support of my coworkers at a place of employment before working at ICE," Williams said.

Teknion Gets on Board

One of Forsythe's proudest moments with ICE was in 2018 when the company became Teknion's exclusive regional partner. Teknion is a leading international designer, manufacturer and marketer of mid- to high-end office systems and movable walls and DeLinda considers them the finest supplier of office furniture.

Forsythe said for most of her years with the company, ICE was not aligned with a major brand. And to show off Teknion's high-design furniture, ICE opened up a showroom in the company's Alexandria Tech Center on Scranton Road.

"I interviewed four times over nine years, but I never gave up hope—that's just not my nature!" Forsythe recalled. "Teknion had for over 20 years struggled in this market. ICE became a Platinum Dealer in half the time of other dealerships and in the last two years has frequently been the top performing Teknion dealer in California despite our smaller market."

Now in retirement mode, Forsythe said she has learned much from watching how others contribute to the community, especially from real estate developer and philanthropist, Malin Bornham.

"He noted that you can accomplish more in retirement because you have more time," Forsythe said. "I agree! I believe I'm receiving this Lifetime Achievement award because of my commitment to leaving a better workplace for the next generation."

"Effective leadership is never determined while someone is leading; it's only when they leave and the next generation of leaders takes the reins to determine if that leader was successful. I dearly love San Diego and the next great generation we have the privilege of developing. Simon Sinek is right, that is our responsibility as business leaders!" ■



Thank you to my family, friends, former co-workers and colleagues for the decades of memories as an entrepreneur, author, speaker, mother and grandmother.
- DeLinda Forsythe

