

On many levels, emergence of dormant Women in Film/Chicago is enthusiastically welcomed



Bridges Media Group VP/sales Jennifer Polk and new business director Danielle Ostrowski feel this is a prime time for the renaissance of a once valuable and vibrant Chicago film organization.

That would be Women in Film/Chicago, a mentoring/networking/career development group that flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, but fizzled out as women moved to the coasts or dropped out of the industry entirely as local opportunities diminished.

Polk and Ostrowski are well on their way to reestablishing WIF/C as a newly vital force. A meeting is scheduled for the first week in March, and a four- person board of directors consists of Malissa Ledesma, Detroit and Selina Hood, Chicago, Polk and Ostrowski.

Interest is running high in a revitalized WIF/C, said Polk. Some 50 women—running the gamut from agency producers, editors, actors, reps, graphic artists to TV station personnel—told her they are “tremendously excited” and “can’t wait for the first meeting,” Polk said.

The organization’s mission to provide educational, networking, mentoring and career development opportunities for women working at all levels and areas of film closely mirrors that of the previous incarnation of WIF/C.

And as it was in the early 1980s, Women in Film/ Chicago is something that is desperately needed in Chicago, said Hedy M. Ratner, one of the founding members of the original WIF/C.

“Do I think this group is necessary? Absolutely. There still aren’t many women in what were traditionally male roles in film—women working in the trades, as directors, producers and in the unions—you just don’t see many of them compared to men,” she said.

“When you are talking about Teamsters and the other various trade unions, you’re talking about discrimination. There is still discrimination at the levels of investment, access to capital, and as far as the credibility of women in powerful positions is concerned,” she added.

“With (the original) WIF/C, we took a bunch of steps forward and a bunch of steps back,” Ratner concluded.

Those steps back occurred in the mid-to-late- 1990s, waning years for WIF/C.

“I think professional organizations always have the issue of balance to deal with, and that can be difficult,” said Suzy Kellett, a former president of WIF/C and now head of the Seattle-based Washington State Film Office.

“It starts out that you get leading women to organize a group, and then you get a lot of women who want to get into the industry joining up. Then, the programming drops to a lower level to accommodate the membership. And then, senior women start to leave,” said Kellett, who left Chicago for Washington a decade ago.

“My piece of advice is that the new WIFC keep some really high-level, cutting edge programming in place to sustain senior members,” she said.

“While we were going, we had an extremely active chapter. We’d hold Saturday meetings and draw close to 100 people,” said Ratner, a co-founder/co-president of the Women’s Business Development Center. “The momentum was pretty strong at the very beginning, and I think we did have an impact.”

“If there was a Golden Age for women in Chicago, the ‘80s and early ‘90s were it. The emergence of women as a source and force serendipitously coincided with Chicago at its peak of business,” noted Ruth L Ratny, founder/editor of the Original Screen Magazine.

“When WIF/C officially arrived in the early ‘80s, women were primed for it, welcomed it and warmed to it. Any type of meeting was SRO during that period. I remember a packed ballroom of 600 guests when I was recipient of Women in Film’s Recognition Award in 1994,” she said.

Indeed, confirmed Chicago Film Office director Richard Moskal, during WIF/C’s heyday, the programs and presentations often played to sold-out houses and drew top industry workers as speakers and facilitators.

“The group is a needed one,” Moskal said, “Right now, there is a good deal of attention being paid to women and minorities in the industry, some of that the result of legislative initiatives. Certainly, WIF/C would be a great platform for helping women take advantage of that,” he added.

Ostrowski and Polk hope to have the new WIF/C providing everything from seminars and workshops in the technical arts to parties where women in film can get together, both said.

“Maybe you’re an editor and you are unfamiliar with a particular camera—We want to provide a place where you can learn how it works, or meet someone who can help you learn,” Ostrowski said.

“New concepts and new ideas that get turned around every day,” added Polk, “WIFC will provide a place where everyone can get together and talk about these ideas that is really beneficial.”

“Our idea is that WIFC will serve the whole Midwest, like the L.A. Women in Film works with the whole West Coast and the New York Women in Film serves the East Coast,” said Malissa Ledesma, of Yessian Music, who returned to Detroit two years ago after five-years at Virgin Records’ film/TV department in L.A.

“I would have loved to have had something like WIFC when I first came back to Detroit. Now I know people, but it was difficult for a while. Just to have had someone to talk to about the industry would have been really comforting. WIF/C would be a great way of keeping people in the loop, and helping people get into the loop,” she said.

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