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Women's Leadership Alliance breakfast stresses networking

BY THERESA KEEGAN

Reality is a lot harder to slog through than dreams – especially when it comes to starting and running your own business. Just ask Judith Papo, who will be telling her story as part of Wednesday's upcoming Women's Leadership Alliance annual event.

"I think that as a woman, and as a small business owner, that whatever support and whatever educational opportunities we can throw out there to help each other, is really important," says Papo. And so she, along with other owners, managers and employees from throughout the Hudson Valley, will be part of a panel that culminates this diverse event, which includes networking, sharing and an annual meeting, as well as the panel discussion. The Tabletop Expo and Networking event begins at 3:30 p.m. and will run until 8:00 p.m. at the Poughkeepsie Grand.

"We'll be sharing out stories about persevering and profiting in difficult times," she explains.

For Papo, who started a document shredding business in the fall of 2007, she is painfully aware of just how difficult the recession was. She also learned that even in the best of time starting a business means, essentially, living at least a year on a restrictive budget. Gone are movies and holiday presents. In are tight times and a constant focus on the bottom line – but she couldn't imagine doing anything else. Coupled with the focus on finances, she has learned a rewarding aspect of interacting with others, making their lives better.

"We're partners with all our businesses," she says. "We're part of their reputation managers, and that feels good. That's what makes it fun for me, and makes it worthwhile. It is so rewarding – beyond the dollars and cents – knowing you're providing a service that's making peoples lives better."

Being a women-owned, family business certainly poses unique challenges she says. She runs the business with her father-in-law, Fran Papo, who drives the HV Shred 26,000 pound truck throughout the Hudson Valley. He arrives on job sites and operates the truck's self-contained shredder, which also has a monitor on it so customers can actually see their documents as they're being shred-

Working through those challenges ultimately made them a stronger company, she says.

"We've come to really respect each other's roles in the company. I'm answering the phones, doing the paperwork and the lion's share of marketing, but he's doing the actual service – the point person. And he's a huge part of why we're successful, because he is a great guy."

Getting to those points of success are difficult for business owners and Papo is quick to cite the WLA, which is part of the Dutchess County Chamber of Commerce, as offering vital support when starting up.

"I think the small business owner is always going to find the value in the chamber," she says. "In the first years I went to a lot of the networking education and small business education programs. These are informative and it's professional people sharing their expertise. On top of that you're networking and getting to know each other. It's great."

And now that's she's been through some of the hurdles, she's looking forward to talking



Judith Papo

ded, and then takes the destroyed paper documents (the truck holds up to four tons of paper) to a paper mill recycling facility, where they are turned into other products. She runs the office and deals with clients, billing, logistics and the host of other issues that arise every day in the world of small business.

"You have to learn how to communicate on a different way," she says of being in business with family. "That was a big challenge, to make sure that we're all working toward the same goals and respectful of each other. It's different from relating as in-laws. There were some tears shed and voices raised, and some sweat, but that is part of it."

with others who are just at the starting line.

"For me, working is much more than a paycheck, I want to really get to know the people we're working with to know we're providing what they need. Women tend toward creating that relationship and fostering that relationship," she says and the WLA helps that critical development process.

"It's a forum for women to help navigate not just the challenges of being in business in tough economy, but the additional challenge of being a woman in business," she says. "It's great having that network to be there for each other and to support and encourage you."