

# Boating Industry

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## 2024

Boating Industry  
WOMEN  
making WAVES

# WOMEN MAKING WAVES



*Stand-out women in the boating industry*



GOALS



# Women Making Waves Executive Leadership Panel

In this “Women Making Waves” edition, *Boating Industry* interviewed three leaders from different segments of the marine industry -- all former WMW recipients -- who share insights and recommendations for those navigating a fulfilling career.



By Wanda  
Kenton Smith

BI spoke with Melissa Danko, the 2015 “Darlene Briggs Marine Woman of the Year” and 23-year Executive Director of the Marine Trades Association of New Jersey (MTA/NJ). Gail Kulp is a 19-year veteran with 12 years as Executive Director of the Sea Tow Foundation and seven previously with the National Association of State Boat Law Administrators (NASBLA). Abbey Heimensen has worked 13 years for retail powerhouse MarineMax and is VP of marketing; she leads a team of 35.

**Boating Industry (BI): How would you describe career opportunities today in the marine industry?**

**Melissa Danko (MD):** Not only are there more women working in our industry, but there are so many more opportunities available now. There was a moment during a National Marine Trades Council meeting a few years back when I realized that I was at a table with more women leaders than men; this wasn’t the case when I began in 2001. During my tenure, I’ve been honored to work with the first woman president of our board, and at the moment, our second.

While our industry does continue to be very male dominant, there is an increased awareness of the value that women bring to the workplace such as new perspectives, innovative solutions and a fresh, unique mindset. This awareness has created new opportunities and opened doors for women across all sectors of the industry. Additionally, there are many more tools and resources available

Melissa Danko, Executive  
Director, Marine Trade  
Association of New Jersey



to assist women in the workforce such as mentoring programs, networking opportunities, discussion groups, seminars and meetings. Women are supporting women: sharing their unique challenges, successes, experience, and knowledge.

**Gail Kulp (GK):** The opportunities are endless, from entry-level positions to the president, CEO or chair of major companies. I know many women who have raised children or are currently raising children while working in full-time, high-level positions. There’s nothing holding women back.

**Abbey Heimensen (AH):** We tend to think of boating and immediately think of sales. And while sales are very important, the opportunities go way beyond. We have STEM positions within the OEMs, Human Resources, Accounting, Service, Finance and Insurance, Real Estate Management and of course we can’t forget all the options within Marketing!

**BI: What do you enjoy most about your marine industry career?**

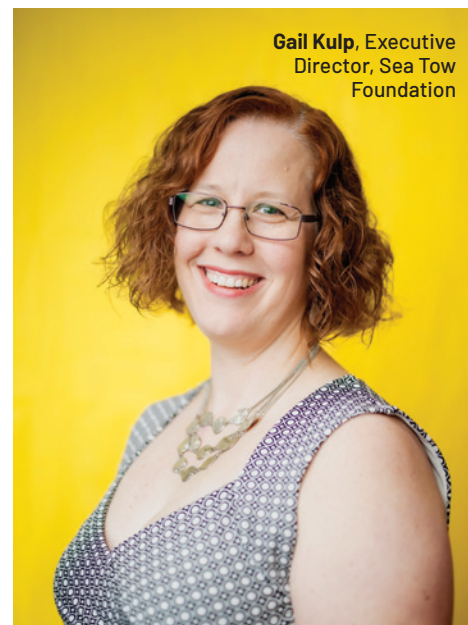
**MD:** I absolutely love working in an industry that represents fun, adventure, and joy! I take tremen-

dous pride in knowing that everything we do helps people enjoy time on the water. Some of my most precious memories are the ones I have made with my family on our boat.

I also love the diversity of my work which includes governmental relations and lobbying, education and training, public relations, event planning, fundraising, producing boat shows (which has been incredibly challenging!), research and writing, and directing the day-to-day activities. Every week is different, and the work is never boring. The people I interact with are interesting and I’ve learned so much from them all.

**AH:** I truly love my career and can’t imagine doing anything but promoting the boating lifestyle. When I was a little girl, traveling for the summer with my grandparents to Okoboji, Iowa (#1 tourism destination in Iowa!) I knew I wanted other people to feel the way I did when the oaks parted, and I saw that magical lake ... the way I felt when we stepped on the boat for the day skiing, swimming, and cruising. My career path has afforded me the wonderful luxury of being able to deliver that feeling to millions of people.

Gail Kulp, Executive  
Director, Sea Tow  
Foundation



## // PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

**GK:** I like the variety and the travel the most. I never do the same thing every day because there's always something new to focus on, or a new project to tackle. And, I love visiting new places, especially if water is nearby. I have a map and have colored the states I've visited: I have only three left, Iowa, Nebraska and Oklahoma.

### **BI: What were the challenges ... and how did you earn a "seat at the table?"**

**AH:** My two biggest challenges are keeping up with the ever-changing world of marketing and being a female in a male-dominated industry.

Keeping up with marketing changes is as exhilarating as it is defeating. Utilizing mentors, webinars, AMA and surrounding myself with a team of intelligent, passionate people have been my go-to and a key to success. Long ago a mentor told me to always surround myself with those that are smarter than me and always have bench strength. These words have served me well.

As for being in a male-dominated industry, I've learned you must think differently and then think even bigger than that. Gender should never precede our ability; women must make sure we don't limit ourselves to being labeled differently and not let gender expectations dictate what we do. The most important thing I can do to overcome this challenge is supporting other women in our industry, actively standing up for one another and leading by example.



Abbey Heimensen,  
VP Marketing,  
MarineMax

**GK:** In 2005, I was teaching middle school in Kentucky and saw an advertisement for an organization that wanted someone with an education background and a boating background. Since I'd grown up canoeing and kayaking, I applied and was hired as the first Education Director for NASBLA. I had a boating safety certificate when I was hired, but I was unaware that the boating safety laws varied from state to state. I learned a lot from the state marine law enforcement officers and state education coordinators. I felt I had finally earned my seat at the table when I was quoted by USA Today as a "boating safety expert" a couple of years later.

**MD:** I was a young female in my twenties when I began, and I knew I needed to work hard to prove that I could be successful. I spent the first few years learning, asking questions, listening, and absorbing all that I could and arranged meetings with everyone that the association was involved with ... state/federal agencies, organizations involved in boating/related activities, other associations both in and out of the state and members and business owners.

I wasn't always taken seriously but I never let that get in my way, ever. I worked as hard as I could and communicated relentlessly. I put our members and their needs first and pushed forward. I have a strong drive to solve problems and help others. We faced incredible challenges over the years. I believe that my work in facing and overcoming them earned my seat at the table.



*Gender should never precede our ability; women must make sure we don't limit ourselves to being labeled differently and not let gender expectations dictate what we do.*

Abbey Heimensen  
VP Marketing, MarineMax

### **BI: What are three key strategies necessary for long-term career success in the marine industry?**

**AH:** Be willing to listen and learn. Be willing to fail fast. Be willing to break the rules.

**MD:** Communicate clearly, honestly, and effectively. Share information that is helpful, informative, and interesting. I always want our members to know that we are working hard for them every single day.

Be Strong/Stay Strong. Maintain strength and resilience in the workplace and especially this industry. We are continuously faced with challenges and hurdles that we need to overcome. Having strength enables me to navigate these challenges effectively. Self-care, setting boundaries, asking for help, and maintaining a work-life balance helps me stay strong. We all have different strengths and weaknesses. We need to know what they are so we can cultivate our strengths and overcome our weaknesses.

Work Smart. Use time wisely. I've learned certain things are necessary to get the job done while others are not. I always try to stay focused and figure out the most effective way to get the job done.

**GK:** First and foremost, you need to love what you do and believe in it. Second, surround yourself with others who are just as passionate about their careers and the organization/company. Third, always be willing to ask questions and learn from those around you.

### **BI: What is your go-to word, quote or business mantra?**

**GK:** My favorite quote is from Katharine Hepburn: "As one goes through life, one learns that if you don't paddle your own canoe, you don't move." Not only does this apply in the boating industry, but in anything that I do. Waiting for something to happen doesn't make it happen; I must work hard and go out and get what I want, or to make it happen.

**MD:** I'm a full-time working mother with incredible responsibilities. Balancing all that I have on my plate on any given day often feels insurmountable. I begin each day with a list of positive affirmations that I repeat often. When it comes to work, I stop and tell myself to "FOCUS" and "MOVE FORWARD." It helps me to pause and get back on track with a focused mindset on what I need to accomplish.

**AH:** "It's all figureoutable!" ●