

FLORIDA WEEKLY®

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NAPLES EDITION

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CLEARLY INSPIRED: Sibrack collection of glass and ceramic debuts at the Baker Museum. | **A24**



FAIR TURNS 50: Collier County Fair abounds with tradition, family, farm animals, rides and games for 50th anniversary. | **A24**



PARADE OF HOMES: Tour beautiful new homes and get inspired by what's new in home design | **INSIDE**



CELEBRATING WOMEN

REFLECTING ON WOMEN'S HISTORY



Melissa Blazier



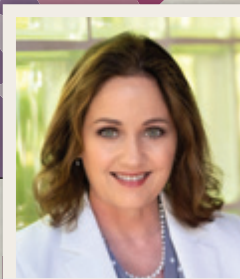
Diann Keecys



Barbara Melvin



Jackie Nelson



Linda Oberhaus

Naples leaders invite all to participate for a better future

BY KAREN HANLON
Florida Weekly Correspondent

MARCH IS WOMEN'S History month - a time to recognize women's contributions to science, law, politics, the arts and contemporary

culture. Beginning as Women's Week in 1980, it transformed into a month-long celebration in 1987, when the U.S. Congress passed legislation designating March as Women's History Month. Honoring women's achievements reminds us to promote gender equality and prompt action on women's issues.

SEE **FUTURE, A10** ▶

History in the making

South Florida women leaving a legacy for generations to come

BY VALERIE STAGGS
Florida Weekly Correspondent

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed a Presidential Proclamation declaring the week of March 2 National Women's History Week. "From the first settlers who came to our shores, from the first American Indian families who befriended them, men and women have worked together to build this nation," stated Carter. "Too often the women were unsung and sometimes their contributions went unnoticed."

Now, every March, we recognize women shaping our history during National Women's History Month. This year's theme — "Leading the Change: Women Shaping a Sustainable Future" — is an apt description for some of the many Florida women who are shaping the landscape of our state's future.

When Gail Markham got her first job in accounting in 1975, the Fort Myers business community had never seen anyone quite like her before. "I didn't realize it, but I was a bit of a pioneer because there really weren't any women in the profession at all," said Markham, who had graduated from the University of Maryland with a bachelor's degree in accounting the previous year. "I worked for a firm of all men, and they just didn't know what to do with me." After years of being asked to get coffee and make copies, Markham decided to look elsewhere. "I interviewed with another firm in town and two of the partners asked me when I was going to have a baby," said Markham. "So, I started my own firm out of desperation basically."

That was 46 years ago. Today MarkhamNorton has offices in Fort Myers and Naples, has expanded to numerous practice areas, and has clients worldwide. The firm is regularly recognized for excellence

SEE **WOMEN, A14** ▶

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CELEBRATING WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH



FUTURE

From page 1

How will you celebrate? Will you choose to support women-owned businesses, read books and watch films by female creators, donate to a cause, commit to mentoring a young woman this month, or advocate for equality under the law?

We've asked some of the Collier County community leaders, many who do these things every day, to reflect on what Women's History Month means to them.

Local author, motivational speaker and award-winning businesswoman Barbara Melvin said she is always looking for ways to promote women, and March "is a big month for us."

It's a time for reflection, and a time to take action: support women's businesses, self-advocate and vote.

"Silence hurts us," Melvin said. "Whatever your political party, get out and vote. Our voices need to be heard."

It's essential for women to hold leadership positions, she says, and often it's the hesitancy to self-promote that prevents women from "getting into the right rooms" where important decisions are being made.

"Women have always been leaders in our communities, business owners and heads of our households. But we don't give ourselves enough credit. The world doesn't give us credit."

"Why aren't there more women CEOs in top companies? We are educated and accomplished, but when it comes to leadership roles, we are still behind. We have a lot of work to do to make sure we don't go back in time."

The only way to prevent social regression is to continue challenging gender stereotypes and to practice assertive communication that keeps ideas and knowledge flowing.

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— **Barbara Melvin**, author

"Be involved, get to know what everybody is doing. Become an advocate for yourself," said Melvin, who as vice president for both the Collier County NAACP and the Immokalee Eastern Chamber of Commerce, which helps women network and develop inclusive business relationships.

"We also have to get over feelings of unworthiness," Melvin said. Women build each other up by sharing personal stories of strength, vulnerability and perseverance, like Melvin's favorite author and advocate, Maya Angelou, whose courageous accounts of her traumatic past continue to inspire resilience in women today.

Echoing Melvin's call to action, Melissa Blazier, Collier County's Supervisor of Elections, reiterates the powerful role of women as voters and civic participants.

"Female citizens make up more than half of our voting population and cast 53% of the votes during the last presidential election. That level of engagement shows that women are not only leading in government offices but are also actively shaping the direction of our community," Blazier said.

The Collier County Supervisor of Elections office has been led by women since 1961, "guiding the office through tremendous growth and change while maintaining a strong commitment to election integrity, transparency and service to voters," Blazier said.

Yet, women continue to face professional challenges and barriers.

"Throughout my career in public service, one challenge I have navigated, like many women, has been working in leadership spaces that have historically been male-dominated. While progress has certainly been made, women in local government can still face higher expectations, increased scrutiny, and the need to continually demonstrate their expertise."

"That said, I have been incredibly fortunate to follow in the footsteps of re-

markable women who helped pave the way."

From 1961 through 2023, when Blazier took office, the Supervisor of Elections office was led by remarkable women of Southwest Florida: Edna Cribb Santa, Mary Morgan, and Jennifer J. Edwards.

"Their leadership and dedication to public service helped establish a strong foundation for our office, and I am grateful to carry that legacy forward."

The women in her office, with whom she works every day to help our community vote, continue to motivate her.

"Their commitment to serving voters, educating the public, and ensuring our elections run smoothly is something I'm incredibly proud of."

"I am a firm believer that you get out of something what you put into it. Empowering the next generation of women starts with encouraging them to get involved, whether that's through civic engagement, public service, education, or leadership opportunities within their communities."

Building on Blazier's commitment to public service, Linda Oberhaus stands as a powerhouse women's advocate who checks all of the boxes Blazier mentioned. As the CEO of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children since 2007, Oberhaus is a leader in the human services field and helps educate the community about domestic violence and relationship safety.

Women's rights are not inherently guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. The women who fought and continue to fight for change often are called difficult, dramatic or disruptive and may not be taken seriously or celebrated during their lifetimes.

"Women's History Month is a powerful reminder that progress has often begun with the courage of women willing to challenge injustice long before society was ready to listen. Throughout history, women have spoken out, organized, and led change even when doing so was unpopular or personally risky. Their brav-

ery expanded opportunities, not only for women, but for entire communities."

Oberhaus has lent her voice to various boards studying justice and violence to help educate and broaden awareness about the complexities of domestic violence and human trafficking.

"In my work serving survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking, I see that same courage every day, women choosing safety, healing and a better future for themselves and their children."

Oberhaus is a state-certified auxiliary deputy with the Collier County Sheriff's Office. She uses her knowledge and experience while

on patrol to guide survivors to safety and assistance at The Shelter, which, in addition to providing emergency protection, also offers transitional living, training and education programs, and prevention information.

"Women's History Month honors both the pioneers who reshaped our past and everyday heroes continuing that work today," she said.

Continuing this tradition of leadership and advocacy, Diann Keys works to ensure social, educational, and economic equality while eliminating racial discrimination. Keys is the former director of Florida State Conference NAACP and has organized the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Parade and Celebration in downtown Naples for more than a decade. Her efforts within multiple service organizations, including Kiwanis (a club she notes resisted admitting women as members until 1987), focus on local advocacy and youth development.

"I think of what women have gone through in the past to get to where we are now. Sometimes I feel like we are going backwards," Keys said, referring to proposed legislation that would upend decades of civil rights policy with extensive consequences for women and people of color.

"I think of Ida B. Wells, an investigative journalist and one of the NAACP's founders, who had to fight. The times

"Women's History Month honors both the pioneers who reshaped our past and everyday heroes continuing that work today."

— **Linda Oberhaus**,
The Shelter, CEO

CELEBRATING WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH



were so difficult; the struggles were so difficult, and we are still struggling.”

Like Ida B. Wells, Keays is a fighter, she said, and that means never giving up on securing opportunities for everyone.

“We take care of each other no matter who you are, what you are, how you are. We make sure everyone has the bare essentials: a roof over their head, clothes and food.”

Originally from Jamaica, Keays said her family emigrated to the United States to make a better life for their children.

“I look at what this country was built on: immigrants. We must uphold their human rights, no matter where they are from. We must treat them fairly, because that is justice.”

To young women, Keays advised, “Stand up, and be the best person that you can be as an individual, but also remember that you represent all women.”

Looking to the future, Jackie Nelson reflects on the impact women suffragists and other early “influencers” had on some of the youngest women in our community. Nelson, a Naples native and real estate advisor with Premier Sotheby’s International Realty, is the board chair

for Pace Center for Girls, Immokalee, an organization that provides education, counseling, training and advocacy for at-risk girls aged 12-18.

“Women have come a long way in a short time in terms of having the right to vote, to own a house, to get a mortgage without a husband. We take that for granted in 2026. It is so important to exercise those rights and use our voices and our time to help others.”

For the girls who attend Pace, Nelson encouraged: “Believe anything is possible. Value your self-worth and know you truly are capable of anything.”

To build the girls’ self-esteem and foster a sense of possibility, Pace introduces successful female community leaders and women business owners on “Working Women Wednesdays” to provide

mentorship and career insights.

“The girls learn in a beautifully safe place that honors the female spirit in a positive way.”

Nelson tips her hat to Pat Barton, the founding board president of Pace, who started the program in 1998.

“For me personally, as the board chair, I am grateful for Pat Barton. She has made it easy to continue her amazing legacy, because she did all of the hard work.”

Nelson said the staff and volunteers continue to “stand on the shoulders of giants” to enrich the lives of young women through role models, inspiration, and exposure to a range of career and educational paths.

“Education is key to success in life in general. The girls are learning how to navigate emotional intelligence, how to avoid toxic relationships. They’re becom-

ing financially independent, and they’re learning how to end unhealthy cycles. That is empowering. They are going to be stronger women and leaders in their communities. They will go on to do great things.” ■

In the **KNOW**

To honor these and other women, and to support these organizations:

- Find Barbara Melvin’s book titled “In the Blink of an Eye,” on Amazon.
- Register to vote, volunteer or become an election worker on colliervotes.gov.
- Volunteer at the Shelter for Abused Women & Children or donate gently used items to their resale shop Options, 968 2nd Ave N, Naples, open 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Visit naplesshelter.org.
- Volunteer with the Collier County NAACP or join the MLK Parade steering committee, visit naacpcolliercounty.org.
- Volunteer to become a speaker or partner with Pace Center for Girls, visit pacecenter.org.

“Stand up, and be the best person you can be as an individual, but also remember that you represent all women.”

— **Diann Keays**,
Collier NAACP and former director of Florida State Conference NAACP

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