

Profile: Diann L. Cowling, CCIM

When Diann isn't busy hunting, skeet-shooting, golfing or tap-dancing, she finds time to serve on the CCIM Institute Board of Directors and member of the Central Texas CCIM chapter, recently graduating from the Levine Leadership Academy; is a founding member of CREW Austin, Inc. having served on its Board of Directors and Chairperson of the Member Services and Recruitment committees; is a Charter Member, Past President and Board Member of Commercial Leasing Brokers Association; has been a member of Austin Commercial Real Estate Society since 1994 and Past President; is currently involved in several philanthropic organizations including Soroptimist International of Austin, Meals on Wheels, and the Austin Woman's Club. An avid outdoors-person, she gave up tennis and racing sailboats several years ago but still likes to travel and snow ski. Diann can make a young person feel tired just reading about her active life.

As Senior Associate Broker with Quick & Company Commercial Realty, Inc., Diann has successfully honed her specialty in tenant and buyer representation. She represents buyers and tenants of office properties, closing over 465 transactions generating more than \$130 million in sales volume over the last 25 years.

I wanted to know more about how Diann came to be the confident, self-assured and successful individual so many of us in Austin have come to know.

Q. You are from Oklahoma. What brought you to Austin, Texas?

A. Graduate school at the University of Texas. I won a Governor's fellowship – was the only woman and only non-Texan in the Public Administration program that year. I didn't know anybody to pull any strings for me – I just checked the box for Financial Aid! I am still amazed that I got the fellowship.

Q. How did you get interested in commercial real estate?

A. I worked in the Governor's office for nine years. I used to visit Houston for my cultural influence – around 1979 was when their downtown office buildings were being built. I decided that I wanted to work with office buildings. In 1979, the Texas legislature passed a new law requiring you must be a real estate agent for two years before you got your broker's license to be effective in 1980. So I quickly took the test and got my broker's license. I had never so much as sold a house before. I began searching for work in the Austin commercial real estate world – but nobody was hiring women. It was suggested that I sell houses. Finally, I got on with a residential firm doing corporate relocations, working for 9 months while still interviewing commercial firms. I found only two women that worked within the commercial field; one was Dorothy Shelton who leased the United Bank Tower, and the other was Beck Spelce, a land broker for Watson Casey. I was encouraged to continue my pursuit. Henry S. Miller Commercial took me on when they created an office division in 1982.

- Q. Looking back on your early career, what would you have changed?
- A. I learned that it was a man's world, both in Texas politics and government, and commercial real estate. Being in the Governor's office for nine years, I got very good at being "one of the boys". I was slow to exert myself within the HSM company, was cautious and careful and I didn't demand recognition. Back then I my company split was 35% to me, 65% to the company, as compared to men who came in at 50%/50% split. It took me three years to get to their level. What would I change? I would not have allowed the fact that I was the only woman hold me back. I was never considered for a director position back then; I think it was because I never knew how to be an "equal". The effect is this made me extremely independent, productive and I concentrated on building my own career. I was extremely loyal to the firm, but I never felt like a "firm" broker – I was a BROKER. I appreciated that they gave me the chance to hone my skills.
- Q. What role did CCIM play for you back then?
- A. One month after starting in the office division, I was told to take a CCIM class. I did. CCIM provided me with an exceptional education in commercial real estate that did wonders in helping me build up my professional competence and leadership abilities. The CCIM designation is recognized like a PhD in Commercial Real Estate. I focused on being the best I could be, didn't compete with others, and I set my own standards. It is very different for women today.
- Q. What advice do you have for women in a "man's" world today?
- A. Regardless of your gender, I would say find your niche; find a group or organization like CREW that includes an extensive variety of commercial real estate disciplines – learn how to see the big picture, to network and excel at your craft. CREW is much more than a brokerage business. Back then, I was so focused on brokerage that I didn't understand the whole expansiveness of the commercial real estate world. I am now well-known as a tenant rep, with a great reputation, but it took me a while to develop that niche. Over time I did it all – leasing, listing, sales, buying, land deals – but it is important to specialize. Back then I felt it was WHAT I knew, not WHO I knew. Now I realize it is both. If I had expanded my understanding of the horizon of commercial real estate early on, I could have reached success faster. Understand the big picture then hone in on the details.
- Q. Your extracurricular activities surpass the boundaries of gender and age...how do you fit it all in?
- A. Well, I hunt seasonally – birds, deer, elk when I am able to. Skeet-shooting is just for fun – I don't compete. I am a golf hacker but really enjoy it, and get out whenever I can. Tap dancing...I am the youngest in my dance group! We entertain for free at hospitals, nursing homes, have shows during the holidays. We have fully choreographed shows and appear around town. We have a holiday show scheduled on December 19 at ABIA! I gave up racing sailboats and tennis, but am still very much an avid outdoors-person. Since I am not married and do not have children, I have time to do all the things I enjoy – add playing bridge, traveling and snow skiing, too.

- Q. With a long list of professional associations and extracurricular activity, I know you are also active in philanthropic enterprises.
- A. Yes, I decided to become an active leader to give back. I lost my mother at an early age and grew up in an orphanage in Oklahoma; I supported myself and worked my way through college earning a B.A. from Oklahoma State University in Stillwater in 1970. One of my charitable organizations, Soroptimist International (meaning “Best for Women” in Greek), gave me a \$100 scholarship to go to college. We continue to provide small scholarships to outstanding high school students. I am also a volunteer with Meals on Wheels. I decided to become a leader within the CCIM organization because I earned great self-confidence through this association and I wanted to share this with others; I was the first Regional Vice President of the CCIM Institute in 2000, Regional Vice President in 2001 and currently on its Board of Directors. This is my way of giving back. I am very proud to have participated recently in the CCIM Levine Leadership Academy.
- Q. How have organizations such as CCIM and CREW impacted your life and career?
- A. I wanted to become active in CREW. My interest was to be involved in an organization that would help build self confidence for all women in real estate. Such an organization did not exist when I entered the commercial field. I am a founding member. We attempted to establish a similar organization several years before CREW was established but it was during a down market. Even then I knew this type of organization is what I wanted to be a part of and eventually the timing was right. What has CREW done for me? I’d say it is a place to blossom and grow. I have grown not just as a woman, but as an individual. CCIM is continually evolving with women in more leadership positions and an expansive community including so many more commercial real estate disciplines. Today they are recognized leaders in technology and networking, not just education.
- Q. If you were able to start your career over again, what one organization you would be associated with first?
- A. CREW. CCIM is primarily about investment sales, finance and brokerage. I’d say 85% of my business is leasing. Back then, CCIM was the only organization available. Today, I would join CREW straight out – we are exposed to the big picture of commercial real estate with CREW. Their networking model is almost as good as the Good Old Boys network!!!
- Q. Do you enjoy what you do?
- A. I LOVE what I do. I am a problem solver, I find opportunities. I get great satisfaction from helping my clients get what they want... I was once told, “Diann, you are so SERIOUS.” I thought that my professional persona was supposed to always be serious – I always dressed in a three-piece suit. Ten years ago, I decided to be comfortable with myself, to laugh at myself. I was fifty years old when I finally decided it’s okay not to be perfect!