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At 25, women's executive club celebrates, re-evaluates

By: **Ameet Sachdev**

June 13, 2004, *Chicago Tribune*

More than 200 women sipped champagne and munched on roasted shrimp with onion marmalade dip Tuesday night at the Ritz-Carlton to celebrate the 25th anniversary of one of Chicago's most exclusive clubs.

They are part of the Chicago Network, an invitation-only professional organization similar to the city's Executives' Club and Economic Club. Except this club is for women.

Its members are not just any women but a local Who's Who of the diverse worlds of business, nonprofits, arts, academia and government. Members include Playboy Enterprises Chairman Christie Hefner, U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) and author Sara Paretsky.

The silver anniversary is a milestone for a group that was one of the first female versions of the old boys network, those informal get-togethers where bonds are forged, access is gained, inside information is exchanged and deals are made.

But the occasion also marks an organization in transition.

While members speak glowingly about the group and the support members receive from each other, there is an undercurrent that the network can and should be doing more to help women get ahead in the workplace.

The network's annual census of women executives at the Chicago area's 50 largest public companies shows that not much has changed at the top. Despite some hard-fought gains, only half of the 50 companies have more than one female officer, and 20 percent still have none.

Last year's census showed only two female CEOs at the top 50 firms in the area, but since the report's release, that number fell to one when Betsy Holden was demoted from her co-CEO post at Northfield-based Kraft Foods Inc. in December. The remaining CEO is Pamela Forbes Lieberman of TruServ/True Value.

"I believe it's time to take an advocacy role," said Laurel Bellows, an attorney and a former chairman of the network. "We are a credible voice."

Adds Pamela Strobel, executive vice president of Exelon Corp., and one of the highest-ranking corporate officers in the group: "It's probably the right time

to ask the question whether there is more the network should do or a different direction it should take."

Members are grappling with the idea of becoming a bigger political force because that never has been the network's mission.

The 75 prominent women who first met on June 18, 1979, at the Metropolitan Club high in the Sears Tower, came together in a convivial atmosphere to rub shoulders and to help each other advance their careers.

At the time, the city had a woman in the mayor's office, another in the president's office at the University of Chicago and growing numbers of women climbing the ladder at the city's largest banks and law firms. Yet many felt isolated and anonymous, and without the professional alliances so traditionally available to men in a city that takes business networking seriously.

"Women hit high levels of corporate or government positions, and you feel lonely," said Strobel, a member since 1994. "The founders wanted to deliberately create an organization that was a safe place just to network."

They had the right idea, based on research that shows building networks of personal relationships makes people more productive. Sociologists call the myriad networks "social capital."

Men typically have networked outside of business by playing golf, serving on not-for-profit boards or joining dining clubs, such as the Chicago Club.

"The reason you want a strong network is that not all of the information to get things done is in public domain; it's not a click away on the Internet," said **Brian Uzzi, an associate professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University** who has researched social networks. "Your network is the only way you get that private information that people have."

The information can be as meaningful as news of a job opening that hasn't been officially advertised to the more mundane recommendations of a summer camp for children.

There's no question that these are women in the know. To be invited, women have to have reached a certain professional status and be actively involved in the community.

Membership conveys a sense that "you have arrived," said Tina Tchen, a law partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

Still, the network is a select group. It has 335 members, and more than 95 percent renew memberships every year at a cost of \$550. Chicago Tribune Editor Ann Marie Lipinski is both a Chicago Network member and a director on its 14-seat board.

The actual "networking" of the Chicago Network is done over dinner or at social outings to the Art Institute and other cultural institutions. The group also has one golden rule: Members have to return each other's phone calls within 24 hours.

Marca Bristo joined in 1995 and initially didn't understand its benefits. "I'm a goal-oriented person," said Bristo, chief executive of Access Living, a disability-rights group in Chicago. "I didn't take a lot out of it."

But as she started meeting more women, she realized membership had its privileges.

Bristo found women willing to run the organization's annual fundraiser. Access Living also receives some pro bono legal work from one of the city's most prominent and expensive law firms, Sidley Austin Brown & Wood, courtesy of member Virginia Aronson.

Anne Arvia, chief executive and president of ShoreBank, found a new banking customer at one of the network's dinners. After learning about ShoreBank's community development mission, the member decided to give a small portion--about \$25,000--of her company's deposits to the bank, she said.

"This is a network of women who make decisions, who can make it happen," Arvia said. "That's huge."

Tchen said the network helps build bonds of trust that are crucial to client development. Since becoming a member in 1995, she has cultivated relationships with lawyers who head or work in corporate legal departments of Fortune 500 firms. On at least three occasions, those women have referred business to Tchen's law firm.

For most of its history, the Chicago Network kept a low profile. That started changing in 1998 when it began tracking women executives at Chicago's largest public companies. The census shed an embarrassing light on several companies that had done little to advance women up the corporate ladder.

While there has been considerable progress, the rate of change has been far too slow, said Deborah DeHaas, chairman of the network and regional partner at the public accounting firm of Deloitte & Touche. DeHaas is also the sister of Kraft's Holden.

The survey also raised questions about what the Chicago Network itself was doing to promote the advancement of women in business. Some members privately expressed concerns that the group had just become another social outlet.

Some members are sensitive about such criticism.

"I'm used to being part of an organization that has an agenda," Tchen said. "The network doesn't quite fit that model. It exists to be what it is, which is a network."

This year, for the first time, the network is sharing the results of its survey with a broader audience, including the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, a group of Fortune 500 business leaders.

The organization also is reviewing its broader mission by going through a strategic planning process, which it will finish by the fall. It is surveying

members, conducting one-on-one interviews and using consultants from DeHaas' Deloitte to analyze the results. Deloitte is doing the assignment free of charge.

There is much debate inside the network about the future. DeHaas said she would support tweaking the network's goals to support the advancement of women. Others, like Tchen, like the network the way it is.

One thing is clear, members said.

"The need for the network is even greater," former chairman Bellows said.

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The Chicago Network

What is it: a networking organization of Chicago's most influential professional women

Founded: 1979

Mission: to create a forum for friendship and congenial interaction; to advance and celebrate successes; to provide mutual support and counsel regarding careers and interests; to raise awareness of broad professional and social issues facing women today

Members: 335

Annual dues: \$550