

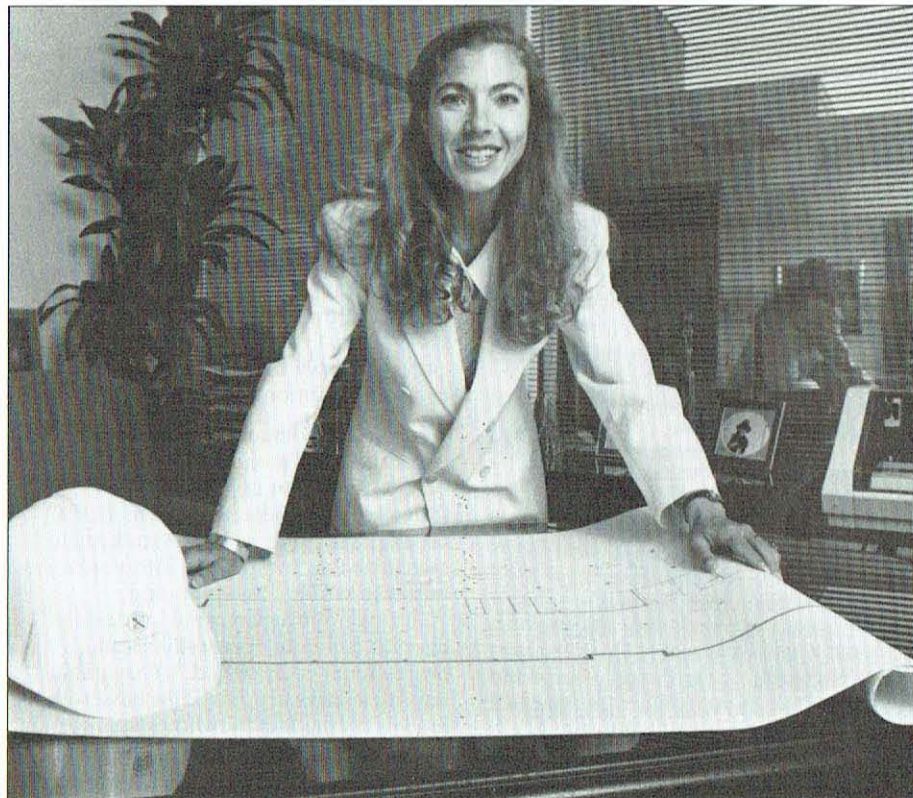
---

*There are so many women in the business world, and many times they can get in the door more easily. But like men, once they're in, they have to know what they are talking about.*

---

# Finding Success in Commercial Real Estate

by Jeanne T. Grammens '86



Gail Sturm

Eleven years ago a balmy spring breeze rustled through the trees on Saint Mary's campus as a young woman walked along the avenue preparing for graduation and dreaming of her approaching winter wedding. Today, Gail Sturm has traveled the world and is the senior vice president of one of the nation's top five developing companies.

"I never dreamed I'd be earning the income that I am, or be in such a male-dominated field, or be so involved in my career," said Sturm, who graduated from SMC in 1977 with a BBA. "Marriage and family was so much on my mind right out of school."

But, involved she is, as she manages a staff of 50 from her Deerfield Park, IL, office building and sets up multi-million dollar corporate real estate deals for the Dallas-based Lincoln Property Company.

"I work as a liaison between architects, developers, attorneys, interior designers, financiers, CEOs and presidents," said Sturm. "Essentially, I must find a solution to meet the client's real estate needs."

How did this young college woman become such a big hitter in one of the largest corporate real estate markets in the country? She got experience, maintained her sense of values and self-worth, and kept looking ahead.

"It's important to never stop challenging yourself," said the woman who jogs every morning at 5:30 a.m. "It's easy to get comfortable and just stop but I always felt God was calling me to do more. It wasn't easy, but in my heart, I knew I had to go on."

Immediately after graduation, Sturm worked as a manager of a cash-processing center for Allstate Insurance Company. After a year and a half, she wasn't challenged, so she started to look around. She met with Willard Brown Jr., then executive vice president of Rubloff Inc.

After an early morning interview, Brown suggested that Sturm join the all-male forces at Rubloff. She joined the firm as an industrial broker and spent the first months visiting industrial parks, learning the difference between a "truck-level dock and a drive-in door, and memorizing floor plans."

"It was anything but glamorous," Sturm recalled. "I was climbing through manufacturing facilities and warehouses in a hard hat and boots and I was the only woman doing this."

Although her sex made her stand out, she took the reactions of her male counterparts in stride. When it was suggested that she cut her hair and drive an Audi, she stubbornly held on to her femininity.

"It took a while to win the respect of my counterparts—especially the older men, who were tempted to treat me like a daughter. But once they saw what I could produce, they started to accept me."

Sturm believes the stone wall of corporate management is becoming more pliable for women.

"There is an evolution taking place," she said. "There are so many women in the business world, and many times they can get in the door more easily. But like men, once they're in, they have to know what they are talking about."

Sturm obviously knew what she was talking about, for within months, she had finished Rubloff training in record time, had arranged a lease for Midas International Corp., and had sold an industrial building in Franklin Park. Through it all, however, she kept a look-out on the industrial market, and in 1980, when she saw that the market was moving toward a slump, she started to think about commercial real estate.

Sturm contacted Elliott Otis, then president of Elliott Otis and Company, in June 1980. Only three years after graduation, she was hired to work with Otis in surveying the buildings along the Tri-State/Edens Expressway corridor, where they helped numerous companies find, lease and purchase office space in commercial buildings. With transactions of more than a million square feet of office space valued at over \$80 million, she was soon promoted to executive vice president.

By the mid-1980s, Sturm had earned recognition as a specialist in the commercial real estate field. In March, 1987, she was elected to the Board of Directors of the Chicago Office Leasing Brokers Association to serve a three year term and is now co-chairing its ethics committee. She is the only woman in the association, but this does not deter her.

"I am very confident in myself as a woman, and much of this esteem was crystalized at Saint Mary's, where we were encouraged to be ourselves," said Sturm. "There, I learned to value myself, not in light of a man, but in light of myself. I was taught how to excel and love myself without needing to identify with a man. I wish every woman could have that opportunity."

Sturm, who married William Douglas Sturm ND '77, receives a great deal of support from her architect husband.

"He was the one who suggested I go into real estate," she said. "And, when I get uptight about the house, he's the one who reminds me that I don't have to be a superwoman, and that a dirty house isn't the end of the world."

Travel is an important part of their lives, perhaps owing to their meeting each other while on the SMC/ND Rome Program. "We try to get out of the country every few years," she said. "In this world where there is so much money, glamour and fast living, it can be tempting to live in the gray rather than the black and white, and we like to get a change of scene to help us keep things in perspective—to keep us from forming tunnel vision."

Although the corporate world may have its fill of "gray" situations, Sturm has clung to her values and recognizes this quality as part of her success.

"People learn to know that they can trust you—that you're not going to promise them miracles, but what you do promise, you will perform," she said. "My clients believe in my talents, but they also believe in my honesty. In this, and any business, this goes far and customers will come back to someone they can trust."

Although Saint Mary's College wasn't in her original plans, she believes the reinforcement of these values, encouragement in her abilities and spiritual rootedness she discovered there, still nourish her today.

"It was really a fluke that I ended up at Saint Mary's. I was supposed to go to Northwestern University. My mother was dying, and I visited a friend at SMC," said Sturm, the oldest of four children. "At a time when my emotions were in turmoil, I found such peace the moment I walked on campus. The spirituality and the sisterhood atmosphere there captivated me, and I still get that feeling when I think back to the beautiful places of solitude there."

Now, when Sturm, still wearing her long, flowing hair, returns to Saint Mary's, she can walk the avenue and linger over her many accomplishments and still dream of what's to come. Today those dreams include using her real estate skills to help the poor and elderly, forming a developing firm with her husband, starting a family, and seeing the blueprints for their new home—which includes nursery quarters—become a reality.

*Jeanne T. Grammens '86 is community relations specialist for St. Francis Hospital, Wilmington, DE.*

---

*I am very confident in myself as a woman, and much of this esteem was crystalized at Saint Mary's, where we were encouraged to be ourselves.*

---