

# TOP FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

By HELEN FLOERSH *Staff Reporter*

*Women-owned businesses enjoy a run nationally and in the Valley region.*

**W**omen-owned businesses are “having a moment.” From coast to coast, more U.S. companies than ever before are running with female executives at the helm. Between 2007 and 2016, the number of women-owned businesses rose 45 percent to roughly 11.3 million, according to a report commissioned last year by **American Express Co.** Such firms make up nearly 40 percent of all businesses in the nation, and generate an estimated \$1.6 trillion in revenue.

Here in the greater Valley region, it’s apparent that the ladies have been breaking the mold for some time as leaders in industries dominated by men. Take **Picore International Security**, for example, the No. 4 firm on the Business Journal’s Women-Owned Businesses list (see page 15). Chief Executive Dr. **Dana Picore** founded the Calabasas company almost 20 years ago after her experience as an officer with the **Los Angeles Police Department** during the L.A. riots led her to recognize a need for a psychology-based approach to personal protection. After obtaining a doctorate in psychology, she set to work building a business that could fill the gap.

Today she leads a 350-strong workforce; her company brought in revenues of \$14 million last year, up from \$10 million in 2015.

Of course, no matter the industry or your gender, starting a business is never easy. But does being a woman make it harder?

That depends whom you ask. For **Joann Roth-Orseay** of No. 9 **Someone’s in**

**the Kitchen**, based in Tarzana, the answer is a resounding “no.”

“Not once. Never,” Roth-Orseay said.

**Ruth Drizen-Dohs**, chief executive of Chatsworth firm **Drizen-Dohs Corporate Communications** (No. 29), agreed.

“Once (relationships) are forged, it’s all about intelligence, enthusiasm, execution and sincerity, not about being a man or a woman,” Drizen-Dohs said.

Still, some women do feel they have to put in more effort to justify their value compared to their male counterparts. As **NorthStar Moving Corp.** President **Laura McHolm** noted, reaching the top is only the first step.

“You’re not just smashing the glass ceiling, you’re proving it can be done better than when the ceiling was there,” McHolm said. “An A isn’t good enough – it has to be A+.”

The top company on the list is **Center for Autism and Related Disorders**, started in 1990 by Dr. **Doreen Granpeesheh**. The launch was based on the results of a study on which she was working that indicated early intervention could dramatically improve outcomes in young patients with autism, according to the firm’s website. Today, the company has more than 100 locations in the U.S. and international outposts in Thailand, South Africa and the Middle East.

The profiles that follow highlight a few of the female entrepreneurs on the list. While their stories differ, they all agree that given the choice, they would definitely start their businesses again.



**STEPHANIE WAGNER**  
President  
Wagner Engineering & Survey  
Inc., Northridge  
Founded 1990

*Stephanie Wagner’s civil engineering firm boasts a portfolio that includes Panorama City High School, L.A. Metro’s Orange Line rapid busway and the First*

*Street Bridge viaduct in downtown Los Angeles. She oversaw subdivision projects in Porter Ranch and Hidden Hills before starting her own firm.*

**Question: Why start a business?**

**Answer:** As a dual licensed professional, I wanted to properly integrate my civil engineering and land surveying skills into a firm which offered and performed both services well.

**How did you build it?**

I used a slow-growth model which allowed me to grow and improve my skills along with my business.

*‘The joy and satisfaction of seeing your business grow is priceless.’ —STEPHANIE WAGNER*

**Would you do it again?**

I would absolutely do this again, but with the business “lessons learned” I have acquired, I would do this slightly differently.

**How being a woman helped you:**

Being a woman has helped me through taking advantage of many small, woman-owned certifications to enable my firm compete for work. I just wanted to compete on an even playing field.

**Challenges of being a woman in business:**

There were clients who were more comfortable dealing with male owners; I sensed some doubts dealing with a woman in a male-dominated field. Being a persistent person, I thrive on proving my firm can do a great job for projects when given the chance.

**Hardest day:**

My hardest days are when I must let an employee go. I pride myself in offering the best opportunities and benefits for employees, so to fire a staff member feels very personal to me. I am grateful to have had very few of these days.

**Best day:**

The day I was named a national fellow of the American

Council of Engineering Companies, my national professional organization. I was very humbled and proud of this accomplishment.

**Best business advice you ever received:**

A past employer of mine taught me to always strive to keep a good mix of public and private projects in my backlog. This advice has served me well through many economic swings.

**Advice for aspiring female business owners:**

Begin their business knowing that failure was not an option – to invest heavily of their time, ideas and enthusiasm. The first three years are not easy, but the joy and satisfaction of seeing your business grow is priceless.

**JOANN KATINOS**

Chief Executive  
AAA Cos., Valencia  
Founded 1995

*JoAnn Katinos was raised in Hawthorne and started construction contractor AAA Cos. in 1995 after working as an exception payment specialist, data entry clerk and controller. In addition to spending time with her three children, she enjoys gardening, paddle-boarding and wine-tasting.*

**Why start a business?**

I saw an opportunity and I seized it.

**How did you build it?**

The business was built by responding to our customer needs in a timely manner. Regardless of what they requested, we took care of it. Our slogan was and always has been “Anything, Anywhere, Anytime.”

**Would you do it again?**

Absolutely, it has been very rewarding.

**How being a woman helped you:**

Being involved with Women Business Enterprise organizations has helped build relationships with potential clients.

**Challenges of being a woman in business:**

There are always people that do not take you serious



**Team Work: JoAnn Katinos makes a point in Valencia.**

but I did not care and forged forward.

**Hardest day:**

The day I finally decided to take a family vacation and my second in charge decided to pursue other avenues in her life with no notice and left me with no one to take care of my business.

**Best day:**

In terms of business, the day the company was at a point where we did not have to worry about making payroll.

**Best business advice you ever received:**

Don’t sweat the small stuff.

**Advice for aspiring female business owners:**

Do your best. Know that people will underestimate you, however; be prepared to prove them wrong.