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APRIL 28, 2020

Portland firm names first woman president



Marlene Gillis

BY JOSH KULLA

Soderstrom Architects didn't plan for its latest leadership transition to take place during a global pandemic; it just happened.

"We've been working on this for almost 10 years," said Marlene Gillis, the Portland firm's new president. "You never know with the timing – for 10 years straight the principals had planned to retire. But they would say that every year."

Gillis took the reins from Dan Danielson, who now is serving as president emeritus. She joined

Soderstrom in 2000, left for a few years, and then returned in 2009. Gillis then was groomed for a leadership role.

Dan Van Calcar is Soderstrom's managing principal, and Michael Shea also is a key principal. The firm has always approached transitions proactively, Shea said.

"It's why we've been around for 36 years," he said. "We're actually the third group to transition up. Dave Soderstrom started it off by himself and he got a bunch of partners who shifted it off to us. We're number three in the chain."

Long-term planning has served the firm well, said Gillis, its first woman president.

"When I came back there was a plan already," she said. "Eight years ago we had a strategy to pair people by sector. We have K-12, higher ed and commercial, and we created a tag-team structure for the handoff, which has worked out really well. We've tried to be strategic about it, and the exciting part for me is I still feel like I'm learning the job. But we also need to start looking at who's going to replace us too."

Gillis, a graduate of **Benson Polytechnic High School** in Portland, took a slightly roundabout route to an architecture career.

"You had to pick a major, and the only two for college-bound students were nursing or drafting," she said. "I didn't like blood, so I

defaulted to drafting. But after high school I was burned out, took a break and discovered (at the University of Oregon) how different it was."

Now, Gillis has moved into a leadership role – one she recognizes has substantial influence over company culture.

"I do have a responsibility to set the tone for the office," she said.

Until recently Gillis was also in charge of human resources for the firm, which prizes multilevel talent because of its relatively small size.

"We had a fair amount of transition with lots of hiring, and we had an opportunity to emphasize diversity in those hires," she said. "We've had maybe more than a third of our office hired in that time ... and I think it's been a significant positive change in the office overall; it represents a new direction."

Shea agreed.

"I think she's able to express what we believe as a firm very well in public and to client groups as well as employee groups," he said, adding with a laugh that "she's a better speaker than we are."

Gillis' focus on K-12 design places her in contact with the public a great deal. She has had to meld the desires of multiple shareholders into a single project. It's not much different than running a firm, in some respects.

"That type of work is much more collaborative," Shea said. "She spends a lot of time with groups of citizens working with their schools and she's really good at that, running meetings and getting those things organized. That's a big component for our firm and she's good at that."

The different experiences and perspectives – both technical and personal – of newer staff members always influence projects positively, Gillis added.

"It feels cliché, but it is an important cultural component," she said. "So my goal as president, I was goofing about it, but it's hire good people, get out of the way, let them do what they do best, and enjoy it. It should be hard and challenging but respectful, and my goal is to continue to encourage respect and inclusion and humor in the design process."