



INSPIRING JOURNEYS

Female Leaders Making Indiana Stronger

By Matt Ottinger

Whether it's striving to make their organizations – and their communities – better or offering encouraging advice, these four ladies are showing how it's done:

- **Brandi Davis-Handy** – president, AES Indiana (Indianapolis), www.aesindiana.com
- **Rachel Osting** – chief legal officer and general counsel, Fort Wayne Metals (Fort Wayne), www.fwmetals.com
- **Jordan Teske-Harrison** – director, Indiana Commission for Women (Indianapolis), www.in.gov/icw
- **Nicole Plunkett** – vice president, commercial sales, Smithville (Ellettsville), www.smithville.com

BizVoice spoke with each to learn more about them, their professional paths and words of wisdom.

AES Indiana President Leads With Energy

Brandi Davis-Handy's path to leading the utility company AES Indiana, formerly known as Indianapolis Power & Light Company (IPL), started as a born and raised Indianapolis native.

She did venture east, however, to attend Hampton University in Virginia in her college years.

"It's kind of a tradition in my family to go to an HBCU (Historically Black College and University), so that's where I went," she recalls, pointing out the intimate campus and coastal setting were attractive selling points.

With a heart for journalism, she studied mass media at the school.

"Really from day one, I wanted to be a reporter," Davis-Handy reflects. "I always tell people I wanted to be the next Oprah Winfrey. From the time I was little, I can recall being

in elementary school and on a Saturday morning, running out to get the newspaper and sitting on bar stools in our basement and reading the headlines to my family."

She would initially get a job reporting at an NBC affiliate in Wilmington, North Carolina, covering military news, and then took another reporting job in the Tarheel state.

"My husband now, who was my fiancé then, was in the 82nd Airborne," Davis-Handy begins. "It was a different time reporting on the impacts of what happened post-9/11 in a military community and also having a very deep and personal tie to the impacts of war and what that means for your loved ones who are going overseas."

She would ultimately parlay her passion for storytelling into a career in public relations, returning to her hometown to work for the Indiana Department of Transportation.

From left to right: Brandi Davis-Handy, Rachel Osting, Jordan Teske-Harrison and Nicole Plunkett

Roles in several Indianapolis institutions like the 500 Festival, American Cancer Society, IPL and more would prepare her for taking the helm as president of AES Indiana, a position she assumed just over a year ago.

Her vast experience in communications has allowed her to navigate how the company assists and interacts with customers in an energy landscape with many undulations.

“We were 99% coal in 2013, and now our generation continues to change,” Davis-Handy explains. “We have solar and wind, and we’re adding more natural gas. How we serve our customers and how we think about interacting with our customers has really changed.”

Her list of board activities – and chairmanships – in central Indiana is extensive. Just a few include the 500 Festival, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Indiana, Indiana Sports Corporation and the African American Legacy Fund of Indianapolis (a fund of the Central Indiana Community Foundation).

“I think I look at myself as being a Black leader in this city who has also been the recipient of so many great organizations that I believe have helped to mold me into the person and the leader that I am today,” she notes, adding she’s also the mother of a 12-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter.

Davis-Handy’s wisdom for young women following in her footsteps would be to “create your own path.”

“I think it’s easy to look at what someone else did and think, ‘Okay, if I don’t check all of these boxes, I can’t do X, Y, Z ...’” she surmises. “I always tell people, ‘Don’t have self-limiting beliefs.’ When I go back into my career and the things that I’ve done, the things that I wish I had done or I didn’t have the opportunity, no one stopped that opportunity from happening except for me.”

Fort Wayne Executive Thrives on Helping Others

Rachel Osting, a native of Delphos, Ohio, initially made her way to Indiana when her husband – an attorney – found a job in Fort Wayne in 2007.

She would then start her legal career as a practicing attorney at a mid-sized law firm, ultimately transitioning to Fort Wayne Metals 10 years ago, where she now serves as chief legal officer and general counsel.

“I love Fort Wayne because it offers opportunities that I couldn’t get in a small town, whether that be career opportunities, school opportunities for the kids, activities, culture, sports – more like a bigger city,”

Osting enthuses. “Yet it feels small, family oriented and community focused, much like my hometown.”

The University of Toledo and Capital University Law School graduate shares that the legal profession provides an array of new experiences, making it an enjoyable career.

“I’ve always loved a challenge, learning something new and putting a puzzle together, so the legal field, where you are constantly learning, is a nice fit,” Osting offers.

With two children ages 10 and 12, Osting strives to “live in the moment.”

“I know these years will go by quickly and I want to really just take time to be with them and support their activities,” she shares. “I make sure to arrange my schedule to be there for the big moments and show them that I support them. On the other side, I also try to use the opportunities and exposure I have from my job to teach them about potential career paths ahead.”



Brandi Davis-Handy is a gifted communicator and leverages her talents while leading AES Indiana as well as for nonprofits she supports.

Osting adds that Fort Wayne Metals, a leading manufacturer of precision materials used in life-improving medical devices, has been an ideal fit for a multitude of reasons.

“I became an attorney, ultimately, to help people, so the first reason among many that pops in my mind is the culture and expectation from our ownership to help others, whether that be community involvement or understanding the impact our products have in the industry and the world around us,” she states.

Osting spends her free time serving others, including on the boards for the historic Embassy Theatre, Indiana Chamber of Commerce and Indiana Manufacturers Association. She also participates in the

Women’s Business Leaders Council, through which women in the Fort Wayne area gather and collectively help the community and each other.

When asked what advice she would offer to other young women coming into the professional space, she imparts:

“Work ethic and integrity go a long way. And don’t beat yourself up too much about the mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes; it’s the mistakes that you learn from the most. And it’s how you get back up that you’re usually the most proud of throughout the journey.”

Wisconsin Transplant Boosting Hoosier Women

Born in Green Bay, Wisconsin and raised in Milwaukee, Jordan Teske-Harrison’s enthusiasm shines through. She encourages all football fans to experience the scene of Lambeau Field on a Sunday at least once.

“Even if you just go tailgating and are

around the area, you just see the community, the environment, everyone’s really fun – I tell people to do that just for the fun of it,” she advises.

Teske-Harrison would earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees in communications from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and eventually made her way to Indianapolis in 2019 to be closer to her parents, who had relocated here.

In 2021, she became director of the Indiana Commission for Women (under the umbrella of the Indiana Civil Rights Commission).

“It’s a bipartisan commission that is dedicated to serving the needs of Indiana women and girls across the state,” she explains. “We do that by collaborating with organizations



Nicole Plunkett balances being a mother and grandmother with leading a team and executing successful sales strategies at Smithville.

and governmental agencies to promote, develop or support programs and services to address those needs.”

She points to organization of events like International Women’s Day celebrations, promoting professional conferences and hosting workshops, a maternal health seminar and more as particularly enjoyable parts of the job.

“We can also make recommendations that are data driven to work with the Governor and Indiana General Assembly to create those recommendations based on what the need is,” Teske-Harrison adds.

Her role also includes a fair amount of travel across the state to meet with stakeholders about how best to help women. She appreciates the picturesque views of places like Michigan City, for instance, which provides scenescapes of Lake Michigan that remind her of home. Robust community activity in cities like Elkhart and Evansville are also impressive to her.

Getting to professionally help women and girls in the state remains a joy for Teske-Harrison.

“I have both phenomenal mentors and mentees; I’m honored to support them and they support me,” she says. “I think one of the biggest things (she advises) is just to be true to yourself in every aspect. Every pathway is different – personally and professionally – and don’t feel like you have to compete or to rush or that your pathway is not where you want it to be yet.

“Life has its own obstacles and challenges and celebrations and to embrace it all,” Teske-Harrison concludes. “Embrace your path and also take the time to say thank you to those who have helped you get to where you are. Also, make sure you’re opening the door for the next person too.”

Smithville’s Plunkett Builds Foundational Networks

Nicole Plunkett’s circuitous journey to the Bloomington area started in childhood as part of a military family that took her from California to Virginia and Rhode Island. Her family ended up in southern Indiana at Naval Surface Warfare Center, Crane Division.

She attended North Daviess High School in Elnora, then Vincennes University for broadcasting and then went to Ball State University for telecommunications.

While Elnora was a small town, Plunkett had big dreams of covering the news.

“I had a really good friend (with similar aspirations) and our high school did have a school news program, so we would run around with old VHS recorders and do stories on basketball and cheerleaders and academic stuff,” she recalls. “Then we found a lot of fun in anchoring the recordings and then spending a lot of time at night switching VHS tapes just to get one program in every other week or so.”

She shares that she and her husband have been married for 10 years, and she has a nine-year-old daughter. Her husband has two adult sons in their thirties from a previous marriage, and Plunkett notes she has 10 grandchildren and was a grandmother before becoming a mother.

“It’s been interesting,” she offers. “We’re a modern family.”

Her career took an unconventional path as well when Plunkett decided to become a realtor after moving to Bloomington.

“I sold real estate, and that’s one of the biggest decisions of people’s lives, and I had a lot of success in that,” Plunkett relays. “I worked for Carpenter Realtors, who taught me how to really market myself in a big way. I put myself out there and I was essentially going door to door chasing expired listings and convincing

them why I – at 24 years old and had never bought a home – should sell their home.”

The Great Recession, however, prompted Plunkett to pursue other endeavors. She ended up working retail for AT&T at the College Mall in Bloomington and ascended to a position in corporate business solutions. After over seven years at the company, she moved to Smithville – a premier, locally owned fiber internet, voice and security services provider – as an enterprise account executive and has now been the vice president of commercial sales for over four years.

Plunkett likes that Smithville is family- and woman-owned (Darby McCarty) and remains grateful for the opportunity – and the impact she’s been able to make on sales strategy.

“Smithville is the type of organization that listens to its people,” she praises.

Plunkett is passionate about the communities Smithville serves. She’s on the board for the Owen County Chamber of Commerce, active with the Greater Bloomington Chamber and involved with the local chapter of Business Network International, Crane Regional Defense Group and Middle Way House serving people in crisis. She can also be found relaxing in her pontoon on Lake Lemon and supporting her daughter’s Taekwondo training.

Plunkett’s concluding advice for younger women: “Put yourself out there.”

“Growing up so rural, there weren’t a whole lot of opportunities to (do that),” she recounts. “And so putting myself in uncomfortable situations, even to this day, I get nervous public speaking ... so I think that every chance you get to work through those nerves and practice and know what your story is and how you’re going to talk about yourself leads you to be better in your career.” ■