

# DelawareToday

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## Great Dames CEO Looks Forward to Future Plans

Sharon Kelly Hake is CEO and president of Great Dames Inc., a local philanthropic group that helps women inspire other women to be successful. As it celebrates its first five years, Great Dames is turning its focus to entrepreneurship.

BY DREW OSTROSKI



PHOTO BY JOE DEL TUFO

**DT: Please share a little background.**

SH: Something that has been a fundamental premise with Great Dames, and what we believe in, is that conversation matters. And real conversations create change. I grew up in a large family of nine people. We spent a lot of time at the dinner table every night deep in conversation. I don't know how prevalent that is today. The family was headed by a very interesting Irishman, who was also a federal judge, who engaged his seven children in interesting conversation. By the way, dinner was a command performance. We were expected to be very involved in school and school activities, but you were home by 7 or 7:30 for dinner. It didn't matter what you were doing. We would make 10 or 12 pots of tea every night and talk for hours. So,

Great Dames is really about creating communities of women who can engage in conversation, but, really, for purposes of creating change. Because we believe in the power of conversation to both create understanding, but also to create action. Everything we do, whether it's one-on-one conversation, whether it's a workshop or an event for a salon or a mentoring relationship, any of our offerings, it's all about creating change and creating action. And none of it is just for fun. We are women who believe in the power to create change and that's why we're part of the Great Dames community ... whether we do it for conversation and understanding, and friendship and making connections. It is rooted in this whole experience I had as a child in the power of conversation through my childhood.

**DT: How many people are involved with Great Dames?**

SH: It's interesting. We have over 3,000 people in our database—primarily women, as you could imagine. More than 2,000 women have been actively engaged in Great Dames initiatives over the last five years. We just celebrated our fifth anniversary. They've been engaged in our mentoring community, workshops, we do a fair amount of one-on-one coaching. That doesn't count things like, for example, I've done quite a few speeches in front of large audiences. We run an inspirational speaker series: Great Dames Delaware, as well as Philadelphia. Now, on our fifth anniversary, we've launched the Remarkable Ideas Institute and the Remarkable Ideas competition. That's our new venture. So we have between 2,000 and 2,500 women who have been engaged in our initiative, but we have well over 3,000 people in our database. We are not a membership-based organization. We started out thinking we were going to do that, but women get engaged in the offerings that they wish to be part of. So, they kind of pay as they go ... that way people can participate in things that they find value in.

**DT: I see that many of them are well-known movers and shakers.**

SH: I think we've hit a nerve. We attract smart women who want to be challenged. They want to be around other intelligent women who are going to challenge them. And they're going to motivate them to take action and to create change. Women want to be around other women who are going to challenge them and who are going to motivate them to take their life into a different direction or take their plan to the next level, or maybe collaborate with them, or women they can bounce ideas off of. For example, our Great Dames Delaware series—we'll have a room full of 80 or 100 women and then we break them into small groups of four or five women. And now they have a working group to commit to putting an action plan together. And these are women who have never met each other. Then they convene on their own. So we're very facilitative in nature, and these women have made great friends because they met at a Great Dames event. And they meet for wine or coffee, and then they come back to me and say, "Did you know we're in business together now?" It's fantastic. That's exactly what we want. I can't be a part of every conversation, but they are part of a powerful conversation at a Great Dames event, and now they're doing something in a very collaborative way. And that's exactly what we want. Do you know what it takes to get those women in the room? You just ask them. I just pick up the phone and ask. I'll say, "This is what we're trying to do, and I think you can help us." And they say, "You know, I think I can. So I will be there."

**DT: Is the fact that Delaware being such a close-knit, small place helpful or could this work just as easily in other places?**

SH: Delaware has been fabulous. It's a great place. The people are very connected. But I also have had a great experience in Philadelphia doing this and in the whole Delaware Valley. I think this model could work in other areas. I have been approached by a number of people to do the same in other communities. I think women want to help other women and are willing to do that. I don't have any reason to believe that this model couldn't work in every community in the world, quite frankly. I go to women's conferences and women's events all over the country and my career has taken me all over the world. I don't have any reason to believe that women aren't motivated by the same thing. In fact, that's the background that I brought into Great Dames—I'm

a marketer. I spent 30 years as a marketing leader for DuPont. I did 30 years of research before I launched Great Dames, talking to women leaders all over the world. And we're all motivated by the same thing, and that is to do something meaningful in their lives. Women are very motivated to help each other be successful. And that's really what the mission of Great Dames is about.

**DT: Your mission statement also mentions men. Where do men come into play here?**

SH: Surprisingly, a lot. (She laughs.) You would think that an organization called "Great Dames" would scare the heck out of men, but it doesn't. In fact, last night at the Remarkable Ideas event, there were many men there. More and more, we attract more men to our events. You know how it is—you can't keep men away. I guess when they find out there is going to be a room full of women, right? Men love what we do. First of all, men are great supporters of women, and they were there to support the women last night. But they were also very interested in the ideas that these entrepreneurs had. So they were there to hear and learn from these women, but they were also there as supporters. But, they are also beneficiaries of our offerings. For example, we've had many, many workshops in corporate settings where most of the attendees are men. We've actually had Great Dames workshops where 90 percent of the attendees were men—engineers at DuPont and that sort of thing. And I said to the client, "I'm not going to change my slides," and they say, "That's fine." And by the end of the workshop, they are absolutely in, 100 percent. They love it. It's a little tough at the beginning, when I walk in with the Great Dames slide with the logo and everything, but by the end, they're in because men want meaningful work as well. And they want to create legacies. It's just different. Maybe women go about it a little bit differently. And women thrive in different kinds of environments. Our offerings are really designed for women, but men are benefiting from our work as well, which I'm very happy to see.

**DT: You said that when seeking success, men and women go about it differently. What are the primary differences?**

SH: I think the difference, in terms of our research, is that women measure success differently. For example, the No. 1 attribute for women, in terms of success, are things like happiness, meaningful work, purposeful work, creating a legacy. How will I be remembered after I die? That's extremely important to women. For example, we interviewed at least 500 women when I was a market researcher. So we interviewed hundreds of women around the world, every walk of life, every background, every culture. They answered very consistently, "How will I be remembered. What is my legacy?" With men, quite frankly, it was different. It was very valid to men, but it was "the size of my bank account and the size of my house." And it's really around "taking care of my family. Am I taking care of my family?" And that's very valid. But I didn't hear that as much from the women. That's great. That's why it works well with the family setting. The point is, as a result, it's extremely important—from a design-offering standpoint—that we focus on women's needs, and if men happen to benefit from that, that's fine. We are absolutely focused on what women need, and we're targeting women. And we are very happy with that benefit, as well.

**DT: You said that 3,000 people are in your database. How big do you plan to grow that?**

SH: We're growing every week. We are very regional in terms of the five-state area, although we have people from around the world in our database. Globally, there are certain fundamentals that are relevant to all women. And we are actually very engaged in a number of national and global women's organizations that are proving out our model. Again, the values of Great Dames are very relevant. I've given speeches at the national and global level where it is very, very relevant. People have asked us, "Can we think about a chapter?" nationally and at sites outside the United States? So it's clearly relevant. Clearly, you want to adapt it to cultural situations to meet people's needs, but the sky's the limit. Of course, there is only one of me. (She laughs.) And I only have two daughters. I guess I should have had more. We have a great team. We do engage other women, and men—by the way, we have a lot of men that are involved on a volunteer basis—that help us. The interesting thing is we've celebrated our five years. We've met our five-year goal, and we're formulating our plan for the next five years.

**DT: Can you talk about that plan?**

SH: We actually kicked it off at our fifth anniversary, which was September, and we launched the Great Dames Remarkable Institute, which includes the Remarkable Ideas competition. So we're really focusing now on entrepreneurs. The first five years was really around mobilizing the Great Dames' communities. And the work coming out of that was really supporting nonprofits that empower women and girls. Now we're focusing on entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs. The women entrepreneurs [involved in the Remarkable Ideas competition] needed to not only demonstrate that they can make money, but that they also changed the world in some way, or impacted the world or improved the world. All 41 did, which is fantastic. So we're going to be launching the Great Dames community of Remarkable Women out of this. I'm mobilizing a whole team of people to support me in that endeavor. We're very, very excited about that. We have resources that we're mobilizing around that and ventures for all of those women, as well as business resources for all of them. And we are seriously looking at the models for the Great Dames chapter beyond Delaware and Philadelphia ... and also a chapter for Young Dames. My younger daughter actually has a chapter called City Sisters. It's a play on the City of Brotherly Love in Philadelphia. The idea is Aspiring Dames, because they love Great Dames.

**DT: Has anybody ever had an issue with the use of the word "dame" in the organization?**

SH: We actually attract everybody from teens all the way up to seniors. Believe it or not, you might think that you'd walk in and see a bunch of 40- or 50-year-old women. That's not the case, surprisingly. We have teens, 20s, 30s, 40s on up. All cultures. It's a wide array of cultural backgrounds, all different kinds of people in terms of public, private, nonprofit—all sectors are represented. And I'm really proud of that. We're very welcoming. Also, those folks are represented amongst the speakers. We value the work of these women. So, we have the Jill Bidens and Ellen Kullmans of the world, we also the Danae Jacobses and the young women who have started nonprofits because they were appalled by the way women of color were depicted in the media. Danae started a nonprofit when she was 24 years old, and she told her story. We have held these women up and honored them and honored their work. So, we're very proud of the women who are part of the Great Dames community. And we are really wanting to make sure that aspiring Dames are receiving the resources and the

offerings ... they are actually getting a chance to design the offerings of the future Great Dames chapters in their communities. I've had a number of them come to me and say, "I want to develop as a leader, but I don't value the leadership development programs in my corporation or in my organization. I value what I'm experiencing here. Can you help me with that?" So I'd love to get those young women engaged. Those are some of the things that are swirling around in my head.

**DT: Do these young women take what Great Dames teaches them back to their corporation or organization and try to change things?**

SH: We have designed a high-impact Women in Action mentoring program with the United Way of Delaware, which sponsors it. This is the third year that we have done this. We're in complete collaboration with United Way and Michelle Taylor, and it's been quite successful. We have a lot of outstanding testimonials. It's open to the community. Women have to apply. We draw from several states, primarily Delawareans since United Way of Delaware funds it. But women from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland are applying, as well, because they really value the experience. What really sets it apart is the one-on-one mentoring relationship and the fact that we engage these women in the community in a community-impact project. There's one-on-one mentoring, there's team mentoring and we create a community. It's about community creation of the mentoring community. Each year, that cohort of mentors and mentees creates a community of about 60 women. And they get involved in leadership development and in inspirational speech series, etc. That's where a number of corporations that they're a part of are coming and saying, "Wow, can we start to implement that in our company to replace what we have?" So we're now looking at that.

**DT: Is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?**

SH: The only thing I wanted to say is women are wonderful, and they just really need the opportunity to come together in communities like this. Because women do, in fact, bring out the best in each other. That's really the whole point. Women bring out the best in each other. They inspire each other. They motivate each other. And you know what? It's more fun that way. It's fun. I want to make sure people understand—we have so much fun when we get together. It's inspiring, and it's fun. I'd be remiss if I didn't say I've learned so much from these women. I'm facilitative in nature. I am a learner. That's the reason I am doing this. I learned so much last night from these young women who were presenting. I was so wowed by them. And I learn something every time we interact. And I enjoy every second of every day of Great Dames. It's been a wonderful experience the last five years. And I love working with my daughters.