

## **Danbury native to help Smithsonian create its American Women's History Museum**

by Julia Perkins, NewsTimes

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When she joined McKinsey & Company after college, there was only one female executive. She would later become the 13th female senior partner at the management consulting firm.

“I’m just on the cusp of all the changes that started happening in our country for women,” Riefberg said. “I benefited from all the women and men who made a difference.”

Now, the Danbury native has the chance to influence a museum that will highlight women’s role in the country.

She was named in August to a 25-member board that will consult the Smithsonian Institution on its new Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum.

Other members of the board include Barbara Barrett, former secretary of the Air Force; Lynda Carter, actress, singer, songwriter and producer; Billie Jean King, tennis player and winner of 39 Grand Slam tennis titles, and Abbe Raven, chairman emeritus of A&E Networks and former chair of the National Museum of American History.

The advisory council’s job is to make recommendations about the location, planning, design and construction of the museum, as well as fundraising, according to the announcement from the Smithsonian.

The museum should share the tales of diverse women who have shaped the country, Riefberg said. Perhaps even Danbury’s Marian Anderson, the singer who broke color barriers, could be included in the museum, she said.

“The museum is an incredible opportunity to tell the stories of America, but through different lenses,” said Riefberg, director emeritus with McKinsey & Company and David C. Walentas Jefferson Scholars Chair at the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia.

Her brother, Larry Riefberg, sees her appointment as “another crowning moment of her illustrious career.” The museum is particularly pertinent with the country’s first female vice president in office, he noted.

“It’s about time,” he said of the museum. “Obviously, it’s overdue, but I’m glad she’s a part of it. She’s a rock star.”

### Local inspiration

Vivian Riefberg is the daughter of Morton Riefberg, a late Danbury Superior Court judge, and Mae Riefberg, a former teacher at Park Avenue Elementary School. Her grandfather ran a department store on Main Street and later a women’s clothing store on White Street.

“My parents never told me I couldn’t do something because I was a girl,” said Riefberg, who lives in Bethesda, Md. “I think, therefore, they helped me believe in myself and they also really instilled a sense of being part of something larger than yourself, whether it’s your community or your work.”

They taught her to “do the best you can, which is different than be the best,” she said.

Her parents also instilled in her a desire to have a large-scale impact.

“I was always interested in the things that were sort of larger than one person, like how could we do this for many,” she said. “In my case, business and management became a great way to try to impact a lot of different people. And in my case, I pursued mostly things around health care and things around in the public sector.”

Vivian Riefberg attended Hayestown and Broadview for elementary and middle school before graduating from Danbury High School in 1977.

“My parents always highlighted education as the way in which to begin to put everyone on the same page,” said Larry Riefberg, an attorney in Danbury. “So higher education, and a strong education, and a sense who you are, confidence, went a long way to my sister being able to walk into a room and command the respect of her peers, regardless of her gender.”

Vivian Riefberg said she grew up with the benefits of Title IX, the 1972 law prohibiting sex-based discrimination in schools that paved the way for Danbury High School to start a girls’ tennis team.

She was the president of her class at Danbury High School, and the others in student government were women, too, she said.

“We’re all in our 60s now,” she said. “That was not the norm.”

Progress for women

Vivian Riefberg attended Harvard-Radcliffe College, the all women’s part of the university. There were still more male students than women at Harvard, but her classes and the dormitories were co-ed.

“I didn’t really think about it very much then,” she said. “I think I took it for granted, and it’s only later in life that I think I really appreciate just how lucky I was that I had these opportunities.”

After graduation, she worked for four years at McKinsey before returning to Harvard Business School, where she estimated about 25 percent of her class were women.

“I tried not to let that affect me in terms of what I thought I could do,” Riefberg said.

She eventually became a senior partner at McKinsey, where she worked for over 31 years. Among her goals were to help her female colleagues and consultants succeed and to ensure women had the same opportunities as men, she said.

“That meant helping both my clients and the firm...address some of the challenges and changes they needed to make to make the workplace a more welcoming and inclusive and diverse environment,” she said. “While we’ve made more progress, we still have a ways to go.”

More women go into higher education today than men. McKinsey has added numerous female senior partners since Riefberg. Yet, she said she has found women don’t succeed at the same rate as men after their first promotion or two.

“It’s not just about attracting diversity,” she said. “It’s about developing and creating inclusive environments for the people you attract to continue to succeed.”

Her career has centered around health care and the public sector, fields where she said there are more women.

She is a board member of Signify Health and K Health, in addition to sitting on the Board of Trustees of John Hopkins Medicine and as an advisory board member for the National Education Equity Lab. In 2018, she was elected as a general director to the board of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

She’s been a keynote speaker at numerous conferences, including the World Economic Forum at Davos in Switzerland.

In her career, she has been in some environments that weren’t inclusive to women and others that were. She took inspiration from the latter, she said. Female and male mentors helped her, too.

“I got some help, and then I tried to pay it forward,” Riefberg said.