

SALUTE TO WOMEN: Karen Koller

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GARDNER -- RCAP Solutions CEO and President Karen Koller credits her traditional business principles and a fresh perspective for bringing her organization's annual income from \$19 million to \$34 million in the 12 years she's been in charge.

RCAP is a nonprofit organization based in Gardner that helps solve housing and clean-water issues for individuals and communities. Koller said the only difference between a business and a nonprofit is whether surplus money goes to investors or back into the organization.

"Many nonprofits are so committed to the mission that they really lose sight of what they should be doing as a business," said Koller. "You shouldn't be a poor organization because you're serving the poor. That doesn't do you any good."

In 2011, The Worcester Business Journal honored Koller with one of its six Outstanding Women In Business awards.

Koller, 59, had her first job in her father's jewelry store as a teenager, where he taught her strong customer-service skills.

"My father was not a good manager," she said. "He could sell a diamond to anyone, but to run a store was not his skill set." She took part in every aspect of the business, including accounting, bookkeeping and purchasing.

After getting married, Koller became a traveling spouse, picking up and moving as her husband bounced between various colleges as a communications professor. She worked as a substitute teacher in Bangor, Maine, and managed a typing pool in Buffalo, N.Y., before coming to the Montachusett region. She was hired at Nypro by Bill Flynn, who mentored her on being a manager.

Her style is to be direct and outspoken with her staff. Half of her 90 employees are in satellite offices in other states. She still credits her father for instilling customer-service values in how she interacts with the people her organization serves, many of whom are homeless or on the brink of homelessness.

Koller was CEO of the Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce for eight years, the Waltham Chamber of Commerce five years and then an executive at the Massachusetts Hospital Association for two years before the position with RCAP opened.

"It was an organization that was really down and out, and that's at no fault of anyone; it was what I call an older generation nonprofit," Koller said. When she came to RCAP, some members of the board of directors had been there for 25 years.

"That's not a healthy organization. A nonprofit needs to turn over its volunteer leadership so that you're governing correctly and that you are allowing new blood to come and help you to look at things in a different way," said Koller.

Her board of directors has the power to replace her for the good of the organization, and Koller said she feels honored to be here at their pleasure. She expects to stay onboard for another decade before she retires.

"The mission is terrific. The core value of what they do is terrific. I just knew that in my heart of hearts what they needed was leadership and a new look at how things are going to happen," she said.