The Ways Women Lead Panel
By Heatherjean MacNeil ’08

Collins, Greenlaw, and Kickbusch Share What It Takes to Rise to the Top

Although gender equity is seeping its way into society, we are still living in a time of firsts and women are still forging their way to positions of power that have traditionally been held by men, according to the speakers who comprised “The Ways Women Lead” panel at this year’s Leadership Conference.

The three panelists, who have been memorable trailblazers in their fields, were: famed astronaut Eileen Collins, the first woman to pilot and command a NASA space shuttle mission; New York Times best-selling author Linda Greenlaw, best known for her survival as a crewmember on the ship that lived through the storm recounted in the movie The Perfect Storm; and Consuelo Kickbusch, the first Hispanic woman to become commander in the U.S. Army.

Although the career stories of Collins, Greenlaw, and Kickbusch are remarkably different, their life’s work has shared one common thread: they all rose to positions of power within predominantly male fields. Through a round-table discussion moderated by Barbara Kantrowitz, senior editor of Newsweek, the panelists shared with conference goers what it takes to rise to the top of your field.

Knowledge Is Power

Collins spoke concisely about her work as an astronaut with NASA, while Greenlaw talked honestly about being the only female on a commercial fishing boat, and Kickbusch recounted, with emotion, tales of her life in the Mexican pueblo.

Collins spoke about the importance of knowledge, saying “When people look for a leader, they look to those with knowledge.” As the commander of a team of astronauts, Collins said she was always at the ready to make weighted decisions for her crew. Without showing fear or doubt, Collins added that she made her decisions based on what she believed to be best for the mission at hand. “As a leader you don’t have to be liked, but you should be respected.” The seriousness of the astronaut’s words were balanced by
her joyful demeanor. Collins also reminded the crowd that amidst the work, “remember to have fun because it’s good for team-building.”

**Passion as Your Guide**

Despite her long list of accomplishments, Greenlaw was very humble. Through her fearless and matter-of-fact nature, she became the captain of a commercial fishing boat in the male-dominated fishing world. Greenlaw said she did not feel discriminated against: “I never anticipated a glass ceiling, and I never encountered one.” During her years at sea, while Greenlaw said she may have been outnumbered, she did not feel dominated. Through her ocean adventures the female fisherman learned to manage her fear. “I had to overcome it (fear) everyday.” Without her passion, Greenlaw said she would not be who she is today.

**Embracing Female Leadership**

During her remarks, panelist Kickbusch had the audience at the edge of its seat. Speaking with gratitude and compassion about her experiences. Raised in what she coined the Mexican ghetto, Kickbusch admitted she had to overcome ethnic, class, and gender barriers throughout her life, “I lived the life of many worlds,” said Kickbusch, who added that through her struggle she was able to build confidence and strength. Kickbusch said she thought women were naturally born leaders. “The power is inside of us. Its okay for us to be powerful women,” she urged. Through humorous anecdotes, Kickbusch dared the audience to stop questioning their right to be leaders. “Stop asking permission. Take your space. Sit on it. It will take a crane to move you.”

The panelists sent their listeners away with some basic advice for what it takes to become a powerful female leader in male-dominated fields. “No crying,” laughed Collins. “Remember that being a female is not a roadblock,” declared Greenlaw. “Do not walk away from conflict. Embrace it,” advised Kickbusch.

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