

# Barnett Shale helps launch women's networking group

BY JOHN-LAURENT TRONCHE

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The oil and gas industry has its good ol' boy network, but watch out: the girls are coming up from behind.

Spurred in part by the attention the Barnett Shale brought North Texas, a group of Dallas-Fort Worth women recently launched a local chapter of the Women's Energy Network, a 15-year-old group dedicated to providing women in the energy industry a forum to network with other like-minded attorneys, geologists, executives and more.

"We know that women are starving for this," said Ann Vandenberg, public relations co-chair for the fledgling group. She added, "I think that's one of the reasons we got together: We felt that women who had stayed in the industry and have risen up through the ranks deserved a forum of their own. It can be isolated (and) difficult to meet other women in the field."

A land coordinator with Dale Resources LLC in Dallas, Vandenberg and others knew they wanted to create an organization that would allow men and women to gather in a setting outside of the usual company get-togethers.

"When we became familiar with WEN we felt like by becoming an affiliate chapter it would offer more benefits to the members we wanted to attract," she said.

The Women's Energy Network was founded in Houston in 1994 when Karyl McCurdy Lawson and several other Houston attorneys decided to level the playing field and give women networking opportunities in the traditionally male-dominated energy industry. They formed the Women's Energy Network and within the first year the group boasted about 200 members. It grew steadily over the years, and currently has more than 600 members in Houston alone. The total membership – Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth and another recent New Orleans-Baton Rouge chapter – pushes the network's total membership to about 700.

"When you work in the energy business and you walk into a room with 100 or 200, 250 women that all work in the same area, it really blows you away," said Jana Grauberger, vice president of the Women's Energy Network-Houston and an energy litigation attorney with Liskow & Lewis, in Houston. "It's still such a male-dominated profession. We're all used to working in the 1990s or before where you're the only one."

But the group isn't about being wronged or discriminated, all parties said. Membership is open to men and women, and the chapters' events so far have attracted people from both sexes. Membership is comprised mainly of attorneys, accountants and engineers, but professions on the fringe of the industry – public relations companies, service companies – also appear in the ranks.

“One of the benefits to our chapter is of course the ability to network with other women in all aspects of the energy industry,” said Jill McMillan, manager of public and industry affairs at Crosstex Energy in Dallas and communications director co-chair for the North Texas chapter. “It's been a great learning experience to see the big picture ... I personally find it inspiring to know there are other women out there to learn from and meet.”

McMillan, whose father worked in the energy field, believes the industry has changed a lot over time, and though the image might still be of white men, the reality is that the industry is becoming less so.

“I think the energy industry has evolved. I think the dynamics of the professions involved today include both men and women,” she said, adding, “With the development of the Barnett Shale ... we couldn't have created a better platform for networking and growth opportunities for women. I think the attention the Barnett Shale has given to the D-FW area is priceless and something we as women are definitely taking advantage of.”

The Women's Energy Network-North Texas already has plenty of ideas to roll out in the months to come, Vandenberg said.

“One of the things we want to develop in our chapter is a mentoring program for young women who want to come into our industry,” she said. “It covers all sectors of our industry, anyone from land, accounting, law, finance, communications, public relations, engineering and geology. So what we want to do is empower women and encourage them to pursue leadership positions.

“We're rolling along at full steam and for a new chapter we've far exceeded Houston's expectations,” she added. “We're blowing them out of the water.”

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