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Vickie Milazzo pioneers
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Founder considered pioneer in new field

Vickie Milazzo Institute training RNs to be Certified Legal Nurse Consultants

by Sharon Dotson

Back in 1982, Vickie Milazzo, RN, MSN, JD, started a legal nurse consulting business near Greenway Plaza. She did so with an ambitious goal: to make at least as much as she was earning as a critical care nurse - \$28,000.

Today, 22 years later, Milazzo operates a highly successful privately held education company - The Vickie Milazzo Institute - a business that enjoyed revenues in excess of \$9 million last year.

The Milazzo Institute trains and certifies RNs to use their nursing experience in new and different ways - as Certified Legal Nurse Consultants CM (CLNC®s). As such, the RNs are able to earn fees of \$100 to \$150 an hour for their services. To date, more than 20,000 RNs have received Milazzo's training.

According to a 1999 study by the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine, medical errors kill approximately 90,000 people in U.S. hospitals each year. The ever-increasing number of personal injury and medical malpractice lawsuits filed annually is the foundation on which Milazzo's business has been built.

Milazzo's CLNC students understand the standards of medical care and take complex and often voluminous medical records and refashion them into readable summaries. They also consult on general personal injury, products liability, workers' compensation, environmental, toxic tort and criminal cases. They serve as expert witnesses, identify damages issues, assist in depositions and trials and conduct medical research.

"Recovery for negligent injuries and the lost wages and medical bills that result from them is the American way," says Milazzo. "Injuries will be with us as long as we breathe, and people will continue to sue for damages."

The one-bedroom condo near Greenway Plaza where Vickie Milazzo got her start is almost fabled among the people who know her. Milazzo lived and worked there for 13 years before she opted for "real" office space.

Husband Tom Ziemba quit his job as a corporate attorney in 1992 to become the company's general counsel and first employee. Ziemba recalls the constrained work environment of earlier days.

"We worked back-to-back, our chair backs touching. When one of us had to get up, the other had to pull up close to the desk. Each morning we unpacked the training materials we were shipping out to nurses and spread them throughout the house. Then, at the end of the day we'd pack and stack it all away, vacuum the living room and shut down."

They gave up officing in the condo in 1995, when company earnings reached \$1.2 million.

But, times haven't always been so good for Milazzo.

She was fired from her first nursing job when she wouldn't work in parts of the hospital where she didn't feel qualified to perform.

Soon after, she experienced rejection again when she was turned down by a California college where she had hoped to study for a master's in nursing. Not to be stopped Milazzo went on to earn the degree from Texas Women's University. But, according to Milazzo, more disappointment came when - working at a local hospital - she realized how little her advanced degree computed to higher wages.

"There was no financial reward, not even a 50-cent-per-hour raise" said Milazzo.



Vickie Milazzo

After a time, Milazzo found higher pay at Ben Taub Hospital as a continuing education instructor. It was there - in the early '80s - a colleague introduced her to legal nurse consulting. An attorney had hired her friend to review a client's medical records and testify.

"She showed me the deposition, and I was fascinated," says Milazzo. "My friend testified just to pick up extra money, but I immediately recognized a serious business opportunity," she added.

Within 15 months Milazzo was working as a self-employed legal nurse consultant and attending South Texas College of Law at night.



Now a multi-million-dollar training company, Vickie Milazzo Institute has grown to staff of nearly two dozen employees, including Milazzo's husband, Tom Ziemba (center), General Counsel. Photos by Kim Coffman.

"Most nurses have endured years of being overworked and underappreciated," said Milazzo. "They are accustomed to getting little respect from doctors and from the managed healthcare system in which they work. They need support and encouragement to take risks. As caregivers, nurses tend to be people-pleasers, but I tell them they are being paid for candor not comfort. Malpractice lawyers work on contingency, and they want to know upfront which cases are frivolous and which cases are winnable."

Milazzo added, "Any nurse who has a CLNC certification, a strong nursing background and the courage to hang in there can make it as a legal nurse consultant. I ask my clients to believe what I know to be true: 'We are nurses, and we can do anything!'"

Sharon Dotson is a freelance writer living in Houston.

"5 Success Promises I Make Daily"

When I started my business back in the 1980s, I made five commitments I've continued to make daily for two decades now. These are not the only secrets to my success, but I know my business would not be where it is today if I hadn't made and kept these essential success promises.

Promise #1 - I will only work my passion.

Every business starts with an idea. Make sure your big idea is your passion and turn that passion into a business or a career.

Business is hard. You will face both overwhelming challenges and tedious tasks. You will experience a lot more joy if you wake up each day to a career that is your heart and soul - a job you are passionate about.

Discard any discouraging messages. This is your passion - no one else's.

Promise #2 - I'm going to go for it or reject it outright.

I have a fear of cliff-hanging heights. Despite that fear, I stepped out of an airplane at 14,000 feet to sky dive. Once out of the plane, I couldn't step back in. I was truly committed, even if not by choice.

Make that all-or-nothing commitment to your own career and business choices.

Don't tell yourself, "One day, some day, I might get around to living my dreams."

Those who want to have successful careers cannot afford to wait for conditions to be perfect - that will never happen.

One thing that helps me overcome my career fears is perspective. Think about the worst thing that could happen if you go for it. I say, unless it's worse than cancer, "what have I got to lose?"

Promise #3 - I will take one action

step a day toward my career goals.

Dreams and visions are great, but without action, they are nothing more than hallucinations.

I got to where I am today - one step at a time. I had to take action every day to talk to that first prospect, get my first project and build my first client relationship. I lacked business savvy, but I took those steps, and the next and the next. Where you focus is where you get results.

If you want big results, you must guard your time carefully and focus on big things.

Every day, take at least one action step on the big thing that will bring you closer to career success.

Promise #4 - I will commit to being a lifetime student.

I still learn every day - from my students, staff members, my favorite writers and speakers and other CEOs.

There are two ways to learn:

1. The hard way - through trial and error, making lots of mistakes. You're going to do some of that anyway, but this method is a slow path to success.

2. Through someone else who has already achieved success. This is the quick path to success. Just about any problem you will encounter, the right mentor has already successfully managed.

Commit today to be a lifetime student and to learn only from successful mentors.

Promise #5 - I believe as a woman I really can do anything.

Whenever I held back from taking action toward living a compelling dream, it was because I didn't believe in myself.

As women, we can draw on unique strengths that have served us well in other areas of our lives, and apply them to our career dreams.

When I started my company, I got inspiration from remembering my days as an RN working in the intensive care unit where I made split-second decisions that meant the difference between life and death for my patients. I decided if I could save lives in the middle of the night when the rest of the world was sleeping and there was no doctor in sight, surely I could make effective decisions in my career and other life pursuits.

Think about your life and the challenges you have already met, both professionally and personally. Think about the times you have gone above and beyond to achieve success.

If you could do that then, you can take the next step.

A recent survey led by Nan Langowitz, a Babson College professor, along with Mass Mutual Financial Group, showed that family businesses owned by women are nearly twice as productive as those run by men. That study proved what I've always known about women.

Whenever you face a challenge, tell yourself, "I am a woman, and women can do anything!"

You'll take your career dreams to new heights if you apply these five success promises daily. Promise BIG and promise NOW.

Vickie L. Milazzo, RN, MS, JD, is the owner and CEO of Houston's Vickie Milazzo Institute, a division of Medical-Legal Consulting Institute, Inc.