

INTERVIEW WITH MARCIE ZLOTNIK

**Recipient of the 2018 Pat Wood
Power Star Award**

**Interviewer: Eric Blakey, Manager,
Regulatory & Legislative Affairs, Just Energy**



The Gulf Coast Power Association (GCPA) has selected Marcie Zlotnik as the 2018 recipient of the GCPA Pat Wood Power Star Award to be presented at the GCPA Spring Conference in Houston on April 17. This award is conferred annually in recognition of the honoree's significant contributions

towards the advancement of competitive energy markets in Texas. Marcie is a senior executive and entrepreneur recognized for successfully establishing new businesses such as Gexa and StarTex and advancing existing companies into energy market and telecom leaders. GCPA emPOWERing Women (GCPA-EW) committee member Eric Blakey interviewed Marcie recently to discuss her thoughts on her career and advice for others entering the industry.

GCPA-EW: First, congratulations on receiving the Power Star Award. How does it feel to receive this recognition?

MZ: I honestly cannot believe I am receiving this honor. To think that I am now in the company of so many of the legends in the Texas electricity industry that I hold in such high esteem, is almost surreal. Not to mention receiving an award named for Pat Wood, a man I respect greatly, makes it even more meaningful.

GCPA-EW: What did you do prior to retail electricity?

MZ: I started in public accounting and it wasn't my thing. Reviewing the back of checks and reconciling bank accounts got old, and I became complacent and made too many careless mistakes. But I enjoyed the people and the clients, just not the work. Unfortunately I didn't know what I wanted to do. My husband Bob recommended me to a long-distance company he had audited, who needed someone with public accounting and industry experience. It was a small mom and pop shop with only three employees in addition to myself. On the first day, I was handed the only accounting records - a shoe box of

receipts - and told to figure it out. Over the next several years, the company grew dramatically, and my responsibilities expanded to include HR, customer service, order processing and legislative work. Every day was a challenge and even though we worked 50+ hours a week for years, I had found my "calling". Taking the shoebox of records, putting the pieces together, and understanding the details and drivers for the business gave me tremendous satisfaction and confidence.

GCPA-EW: How did you transition to the retail electricity side from telecommunications?

MZ: One of my closest friends was asked if she knew anyone who might be interested in running the operations of a startup in the newly deregulated electricity industry, which would become Gexa Energy. I had been retired, but the challenge was too great to pass up and I accepted. It was tough and we had lots to learn. I will never forget - we went to a major generator in the state to buy electricity and when asked how we would schedule purchases, we said with Excel spreadsheets. We were laughed out of the room, but we did get a deal done. It was beyond chaos. Everything was difficult as the market was testing, learning and refining the rules all at the same time. But I loved it!

GCPA-EW: So were there moments you didn't think your business would be successful?

MZ: Yes. There were several moments. In addition to our billing company going bankrupt, what was probably the most memorable event occurred fairly soon after the market opened. At the time, retailers weren't receiving timely readings from the utilities, and therefore we couldn't bill our customers or pay those bills. One of these utilities threatened to shut down our business if we didn't pay them. I decided to reach out to commissioners for help. One told me to "put my big boy pants on." With nowhere else to turn, I called another commissioner, and even though he didn't know me, he took the call, listened to the situation and proposed a solution. "Tell the utility if they continue to harass you, I will penalize them for every day they are delinquent in sending you the reads," he said. "Please be sure they know this was a direct quote from me." Thankfully the utility backed off. I'm not sure the commissioner realized the impact he had on our business and what it meant to me that he listened.

GCPA-EW: How did you end your employment with Gexa?

MZ: I was let go quite unexpectedly and in an extremely unprofessional manner, which left me devastated. I had co-

Please see ZLOTNIK page 2

Continued from the prior page

founded this company and overnight it was gone without an explanation of why. On reflection, I'm sure it was due to differences I had with the CEO and Board over financial controls and expansion. But I couldn't see it at the time. The experience, while demoralizing, was the ultimate motivator going forward.

GCPA-EW: That was obviously a big moment in your life. How did you end up going from that to starting StarTex?

MZ: I knew I was not ready to leave the electric industry and had been exploring several opportunities when my husband Bob said, "Why do this for someone else, why don't we try it and start our own company?" Bob was the one who had always wanted to be an entrepreneur, not me. And my Gexa experience had completely sucked the life out of me. I wasn't sure if I could do it again. Did I have the energy and drive for another 24/7 non-stop experience? If not for Bob's tenacity and persuasion skills, we wouldn't have started StarTex. But I'm so glad we did.

GCPA-EW: What did you learn from these experiences about yourself and leadership?

MZ: I was determined to be a leader that did right by those around me whether they were employees, customers, vendors, etc. I would never do to anyone what was done to me. Sure, I had to fire employees and have other unpleasant conversations. But there would be transparency and respect. In addition, employees would have the opportunity to share in the success of StarTex if/when we sold. We created an ESOP and when StarTex was sold to Constellation, every employee was rewarded. On average, staff members received 6x their annual salary as a bonus. Several made over half-a-million dollars. It was a one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had.

GCPA-EW: What advice do you have for those entering the electricity industry, particularly young women? Also, have you ever been harassed or intimidated or discriminated because you're female?

MZ: I have never been discriminated against, never been harassed and never run into the glass ceiling. Sometimes, I feel guilty that I have been so fortunate as there are so many women who have faced extreme adversity.

For young women, especially those going into an industry primarily dominated by males, and most are, I suggest skimming the sports section daily. Some may suggest that's degrading and we shouldn't have to be "one of the guys." But it gets back to relationships and working together. Individuals will work with people they feel comfortable around - that's the bottom line. For me, it was a bit easier as the mother of three extremely sports-

oriented kids. I knew all the highlights of whatever was the game of the day.

GCPA-EW: What message do you have for leaders in the electricity industry?

MZ: Executives need to get out of their offices and sit in the shoes of their team. Talk to your staff and answer customer service phone calls. Solicit feedback from front-line employees. They often know exactly what needs to be done, but there's no one listening. Or when dealing with an employee who is underperforming, instead of assuming it's the employee's fault, try looking inward and asking if that person is set up to succeed. Do they have the right tools, is the environment conducive for that position, and is that person suited for that type of job?

The vast majority of employees want to go to work each day and be successful; it's often the company that has created the stumbling blocks. In addition, never be afraid to admit you've made a mistake, or think you will look weak by giving credit to a team member or peer. As the boss, it shouldn't be about you.

GCPA-EW: What motivates you today now that you no longer are running a retail provider?

MZ: Right now I enjoy working with companies and individuals, primarily early stage or start-ups, helping them navigate next steps or problem solve. As an example, I met with a young woman today I have been mentoring for a few years who is the epitome of an entrepreneur. She has successfully launched a big data company targeted at retailers and their interaction with their customers. We meet regularly to discuss issues ranging from HR concerns to setting KPI's and raising capital. I still enjoy the puzzle solving process, and I'm honestly surprised and humbled when I can add value.

I sit on several boards, including a retailer, a retail service company, the McCombs School Advisory Board and a few others. There are also the non-profit organizations which I support, but those seem to be the most challenging for me. In many cases, the organizations aren't run like businesses which conflicts with my world of accounting, metrics and business processes. More and more, I'm pulling away from these roles and helping financially instead.

There are however two non-profit organizations I am deeply committed to. One is the foundation for our baseball team, the Sugar Land Skeeters, whose mission is to provide a healthy environment for every child regardless of disability, socio-economic conditions or other obstacles. The other is an annual ethics symposium in honor of my late father Lyon Cohen. Each year we select a topic - this year it is the media - and we will explore the various ethical challenges facing the industry. It's extremely rewarding to honor the most ethical, humble and kind person I know.



GCPA emPOWERing Women Leadership Conference 2018 Wraps Up Successfully; Plans for 2019 Underway

Despite severe icing and weather issues that prevented many from being able to attend, the 2018 GCPA emPOWERing Women Leadership Conference was a big success! Over 300 registered and 200 attended the conference. Participants discussed the challenges of managing different generations in the workplace, creating a two-minute elevator pitch, challenges with who performs the “housework” at the office, and powering up influence and communications to get results.

Planning for the next leadership conference in 2019 will soon be underway. Katie Coleman, Partner at Thompson & Knight, LLP will chair the planning committee. The conference will take place on Wednesday, January 23rd at the AT&T Conference Center in Austin. View the [emPOWERing Women page](#) at the GCPA Website.

20+ Attendees Learn Strategies to “Take Charge of Your Career” at Webinar Event



More than twenty people met on March 30th in the virtual world to take part in the “Take Charge of Your Career” webinar organized by the GCPA emPOWERing Women. The event was led by instructor Audrey Gallien, Senior Director of Business Development at Catalyst (pictured). During the course, a variety of topics were examined and discussed, including

myths and realities on the most effective methods for advancement, differences between the advancement and perceptions of men vs. women, sponsorship and mentoring, internal vs. external strategies for advancement, personal “strategic network” development,

the challenges of “otherness” and gender minority, the value of networking, and effectively telling your own story.

Cocktail Reception in New Orleans

GCPA emPOWERing Women hosted their 2nd Annual New Orleans Cocktail Reception on February 7th at Le Meridien Hotel. This event was held in connection with the GCPA MISO Conference on February 8th. The reception was organized by Jennifer Vosburg of NRG with approximately 30+ in attendance. If you are interested in being a part of the emPOWERing Women group in the MISO/SPP area, contact [Jennifer Vosburg](#).

Topgolf Networking Event on April 16

GCPA emPOWERing Women will again host a very popular networking event at Topgolf in Katy, TX on Monday, April 16th from 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm - in advance of the GCPA Spring Conference in Houston. Last year, the event drew 75 golfers and raised over \$10,000 to support GCPA emPOWERing Women’s Students Scholarship Program.

The purpose of the scholarship program is to (1) assist deserving students in attaining their educational goals; (2) encourage and inspire students to pursue careers in the electric power industry; (3) promote diversity; and (4) support educational institutions across the GCPA regions. Register [here](#) today!

OTHER UPCOMING GCPA EVENTS

2018 GCPA Spring Conference

April 17th - 18th, The Hilton Americas in Houston
[Register Now](#)

2018 Mexico Power Market Conference

May 16th, Presidente InterContinental in Mexico City
[Register Now](#)

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