



# Breaking -Down Barriers

## Women Prominently Represented In Airport Concessions

By Andrew Tellijohn

Decades ago, airports mirrored other industries in that they were dominated by men. Successful operators of today remember when the number of females at an industry conference could be counted on their fingers.

But times have changed dramatically. As concessions evolved, gender biases began fading away. And although the playing field may not be entirely level just yet, the atmosphere has improved to where some of the most successful and influential companies in the food, retail and services side of the industry have been started and are operated by women.

Many women helped break down those barriers. Here is a sampling of some of their stories. Answers have been edited for length.

### Kathleen Avila, Managing Partner, Avila Retail Development & Management

"This is a good time, quite frankly, for women in this industry. If you look at aviation directors and concession managers, more and more are women in leadership positions and that will make a difference. The more women that are leaders at the top, the more the sort of division will go away."

Kathleen and John Avila were operating a retail store in Old Town Albuquerque and wholesaling Native American jewelry when they were approached by Host International two decades ago about partnering on a store at **Albuquerque**

### **International Sunport** (ABQ).

Political battles abounded and Host eventually dropped its bid, but the Avilas were approached by another partner and ended up earning a spot at ABQ. For various reasons when they were getting started, it





was easier for men and ethnic minorities to receive Disadvantaged Business Enterprise certification, Kathy Avila says. So John has the DBE certification and a 53 percent stake in the business. But Kathy Avila has had an equal or greater focus on the **Avila Retail Development & Management's** financials and day-to-day operations. The company now has 22 stores spanning four airports.

*Tellijohn: How did you end up in airports?*

*Avila:* We had never considered or heard anything about airport retailing. It sounded like a great opportunity, so we started to work with Host. We were to have been their 30 percent DBE partner and so we went about proposing for the retail concessions at ABQ.

Politics entered in and it became a very ugly fight. ... Ultimately, Host threw up its hands and said we are done here. ABQ doesn't want us, so they pulled out of the bid.

John and I had no money. We didn't have enough equity in our house to secure a loan, so we figured we were pretty much out of it. Another person who had several retail stores whose name I would prefer not mention called and asked if we would partner with him in a bid. We were successful in getting a store in ABQ in 1991. I thought we had died and gone to retail heaven.

When we opened the doors of that store, it was busy. It was successful. It was exciting. That's when John and I knew that could be our future.

*Tellijohn: What challenges did you face as a woman in the airport industry?*

*Avila:* Women will always be looked at secondarily. Men who are [Airport Concessionaire Disadvantaged Business Enterprises] are always sort of the leaders of their company. And I think women have something to do with that. I think we step back, like in our case, and say, 'OK, John, you be the majority partner and I'll be the minority partner and we will go forward' because it's an advantage for us to have the certification. If I were 20 years younger, I probably wouldn't say OK to that. I would fight for my own certification or recognition as a woman in business.

I recently read this book by Sheryl Sandberg called 'Lean In.' It really does speak to the fact that women and men in businesses, we all behave in a particular way that seems to expect the man should be the major partner and to have a senior position and a career, whereas women on

the other hand expect not to and we just perpetuate the whole thing.

*Tellijohn: Did you have any mentors along the way?*

*Avila:* I have to give credit to Host when we were very first partnered with them. They absolutely helped us understand how to put together a proposal. So what are the calculations, how do you look at enplanements, what is customer behavior in an airport? And we just were sponges for that information and then we took that information and that education, if you will, and used it in our proposals that became winning proposals.

*Tellijohn: Has the playing field leveled for women?*

*Avila:* This is a good time, quite frankly, for women in this industry. If you look at aviation directors and concession managers, more and more are women in leadership positions and that will make a difference. The more women that are leaders at the top, the more the sort of division will go away.

## Cary Cruea, President, Massage Bar

"I certainly have seen more women-owned businesses and I think that probably when I came around 20 years ago, it was a good old boys club. But I know it is not that way anymore."

When Cary Cruea got out of massage school and started a private practice, she had a hard time getting commercial real estate executives to buy into the legitimacy of massage in an open space.

But she found a kindred spirit in a property manager at **Seattle-Tacoma International (SEA)** who was willing to give the concept a shot. Cruea's company, **Massage Bar**, now spans more than a dozen locations at eight airports. Perhaps more importantly, she says, many industry colleagues give her at least some credit for helping open the door for other service companies to enter the industry.

*Tellijohn: Why did you open your own business?*

*Cruea:* I started as a massage therapist, so I came out of massage school and started a private practice for a couple years and worked on my massage skills. But I had much more of an entrepreneurial spirit that got passed down from my

grandmother, who was the first real estate broker here in Washington state.

So I started Massage Bar and pursued that. ... We went into the convention center, which is in the heart of downtown Seattle. What that did was give me a working model. It gave me numbers and it gave me the realization that yes, people in fact are willing to come to a location for seated massage. And how can I do this with more people?

My desire was to bring massage out of the closet, if you will. Bring it out of the closet, bring it out into the open in front of God and everybody so people can see and understand what massage is and what it isn't, because back then I was fighting the stigma that we are prostitutes or hippies, but not that we were educated or trained medical professionals.

*Tellijohn: Who mentored you along the way?*

*Cruea:* I do have silent business owners. Let's just call them Paul and Nancy. They owned the massage school that I went to



school at and when I came up with this crazy idea called Massage Bar.

Paul would be my business mentor. It's silent in terms of when they said we'd provide the money to get started for this, but we're busy with the school and we don't want any involvement. And it has been that way for 20 years..

*Tellijohn: How did you get into airports?*

*Cruea:* It was very fortuitous, the timing at SEA. Again, I had numbers, I had photos, I had a working model at the convention center and they spoke highly of me. And I took that to SEA and the property manager I was working with, her sister was going to massage school at the time that I approached her, so she was like, 'Yeah, OK, this is great.'

*Tellijohn: Did you face any challenges as a woman in the industry?*

*Cruea:* I've got a long perspective to look at in terms of the airport industry. I've grown up with a lot of my peers there.



We've all grown up together the last 20 years. ... I have seen probably about 10 years ago a huge influx of women in property management departments in concession teams coming from malls and coming from other areas of background like that but coming in to the airport arena in that way I think has helped for women.

I certainly have seen more women-owned businesses and I think that probably when I came around 20 years ago, it was a good old boys club. But I know it is not that way anymore.

**Ann Ferraguto, Principal,  
AirProjects Inc.**

"When I first started out with Metropolitan Washington airports, there would only be a handful of women there. You had a choice at that point: You either had to become part of what was going on or be left behind. So I also worked really hard and received credit for that."

Ann Ferraguto had always produced solid results and worked long hours for other companies when she decided to strike out on her own. As the concessions industry at airports began evolving, she saw an opportunity to start a consulting firm focused solely on commercial and concessions practices.

So she opened **AirProjects Inc.** in June 2000. Her company has grown to a team of eight employees who have worked on

projects at 60 airports in North America and internationally. It has become, she thinks, the largest dedicated concessions consulting practice in North America.

*Tellijohn: Was a dedicated concessions practice a piece that was missing at the time?*

*Ferraguto:* Yeah, there wasn't anybody who was dedicated to that. It was one practice area among many, generally. So I saw it as an opportunity to build expertise around that practice area.

*Tellijohn: You opened just as*



*concessions was really evolving?*

*Ferraguto:* It was, yes. Some things had started to occur probably in the last 10 years prior to that, but it was gaining focus among airports, airport planners. It was no longer the afterthought necessarily in airport planning. It was driving some airport layouts.

*Tellijohn: Who mentored you along the way?*

*Ferraguto:* Early influences and mentoring

came from Richard Griesbach and Clyde Bingman [who were high ranking officials with what is now the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority]. They hired me when I was in graduate school into a temporary position as a business analyst at MWAA. At that time, the commercial department managed everything from concessions to advertising to taxis and ground transportation. It wasn't as specialized as it is now. It was the mid-1980s, and most concessions were generic and run by one or two large concessionaires at most airports.

They and we collectively tried to take a fresh look at things. Although difficult, we actually managed to introduce some of the first brands at airports. I remember in 1985, we brought a Crabtree & Evelyn into the airport. We brought a branded candy concept in. These were some of the first brands in airports in North America.

*Tellijohn: How did you first get into airports?*

*Ferraguto:* The Metro airports had started a program to hire interns in these temporary positions as almost a trial to get more business-minded people into airport management. They had gone around to grad schools in the Washington area and it was suggested to me by the head of my department at school that maybe I should consider applying for it. So I did.

*Tellijohn: Has most of your work history come in the airport industry?*

*Ferraguto:* When I was in grad school, I was working in banking when I took the airport position. After working for **Ronald Reagan Washington National (DCA)** and **Washington Dulles International (IAD)**, I



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spent a few years in commercial and residential development. And I handled everything through the years: project budgeting, sales, marketing, project financing. That was really great experience. I learned a lot there about construction and overall project management, commercial real estate, financing.

After that, my experience came together between the airport and the commercial real estate development. I went to work for a boutique real estate consulting firm that was subsequently bought by **Ernst & Young**. We became their national real estate consulting division. And at that point, I worked on airports, such as **Pittsburgh International** (PIT), when their new terminal was being developed, and DCA's newer terminal. I worked on **Minneapolis-St. Paul International** (MSP) when Northstar Crossing was developed, as well as some non-airport real estate projects. But the airports got into my blood and my attraction to airports prevailed.

*Tellijohn: How challenging is it for women to get into airport leadership positions in this industry?*

*Ferraguto:* That's an interesting question. When I first started out with Metropolitan Washington airports, there would only be a handful of women there. You had a choice at that point: You either had to become part of what was going on or be left behind. So I also worked really hard and received credit for that. So I didn't really feel I was treated differently.

## Donata Russell Major, CEO, Concessions International

"I grew up in an environment where women have been supported to pursue their dreams and excel. Our vice president of human resources, vice president of business development, our general counsel [and] our senior vice president of operations are all females."

When Donata Russell Major graduated from college, she went to work for **IBM** as a marketing rep. She quickly realized she might have a better opportunity to get a more general business experience by returning home to the family business.

She started out as an executive

assistant learning the ropes under her father, Herman J. Russell, and his business partners and employees. The time she spent learning the business paid off in February when she was named CEO. **Concessions International** has grown from a single location at **Los Angeles International** (LAX) to outgrowing the DBE program and operating food and beverage outlets at seven of the country's largest airports.

*Tellijohn: What made you decide to return to the family-owned business?*

*Major:* Initially, after college, I did work for IBM for 3.5 years. Honestly, it doesn't take you long in corporate America, when you have a family business, to realize that you are somewhat limited in your growth opportunities.

Our family has other lines of businesses. We do construction, program management, real estate development and property management. Initially, it was my thought to come home and work in the various segments of the business and figure out which one I really wanted to concentrate in. I started out in property management and spent about six months there in the early '80s when LAX was starting to grow and take off. In 1984, we ended up moving into the new Bradley Terminal, where we were selected to be the operator.

It gave us a larger base in Los Angeles and required us to do some things differently in our corporate office, so we initially had an operations team and support



for the human resources and accounting came through **Host International**. They provided those services but as we started to grow, we needed to bring all of that in-house. I came over to concessions to work with the management team that had been put together to do just that.

*Tellijohn: Were there mentors who helped you along the way?*


*Major:* Certainly my father and his partners, the late Mr. Jesse Hill and Mr. Felker Ward. At the time, there were three partners in concessions. In 1999, my father bought his partners out. I watched each of them early on. They each had different management styles and skills they brought to the business. I learned a lot from the three of them.

I've also learned a great amount from the people who worked for us. I listened to our HR group and our operations group and really learned a lot about the hands-on part: how do you make the airport operations successful from working in the units and listening to the staff tell me what the difference was and how we were successful.

*Tellijohn: What about the airport industry appealed to you?*

*Major:* It was more or less the food and beverage industry. When I came back home and I got an opportunity to work in the concessions business, I got immediate exposure to all aspects of business management. I'm more of a generalist at heart, so that was more attractive to me. I got to manage people, I got to deal with HR issues, I got to manage the financial statement to make sure we were profitable. I had to deal with effective merchandising and marketing of our food. It was everything in one, and I think people tend to forget that. When you think food and beverage, you don't think how broad a business it is.

*Tellijohn: Have you faced any challenges as a woman in getting noticed in the airport industry?*

*Major:* I grew up in an environment where women have been supported to pursue their dreams and excel. Our vice president of human resources, vice president of business development, our general counsel [and] our senior vice president of operations are all females. We have two airport general managers who run our day-to-day food and beverage operations who are female. I've always grown up in an environment where women have been nurtured to do whatever it is they want to, so I don't see those limits. 

*We'd like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Andrew Tellijohn at [andrew@airportrevenue.com](mailto:andrew@airportrevenue.com).*