

Our branch is proud to recognize Denise Burian as the OML Branch Distinguished Woman for 2023. Since joining in 2014, she has immersed herself in many aspects of the organization, from public policy and technology, to STEM Conference and Evening Salon. Over nine years she created and implemented new priorities and initiatives, and assumed leadership roles, including a two-year stint as president.

Born in 1955 to Dorothy and Richard (of Czech ancestry), Denise spent her preteen years growing up in the small town of Wagner, South Dakota, population 1,500. She and two brothers were not only close in age but also were closely bonded and surrounded by grandparents and relatives. Reading, listening to the news, and talking politics was routine and Sunday dinner at grandma's was a must. When she was 12, Denise's parents moved the family to Pittsburg, California.

Denise embraced politics beginning in high school in 1972, when she volunteered for McGovern's campaign for President. Later on, when her two daughters were small, she served on the Pittsburg Unified School District Board of Education. Her family to this day continues to be politically active. Her daughter, Mariah ran for office in Tennessee, and Denise worked on her campaign.

Denise attended Diablo Valley College and transferred to UC Berkeley on a scholarship. At Berkeley, counselors asked her how she saw herself in a work environment. Her answer: "I picture myself in a business suit and carrying a briefcase." Denise wanted to major in business but counselors discouraged her, and after being steered toward sociology, she graduated from UC Berkeley in 1977 with a degree in that field, and continued on to get a master degree in Public Administration from Golden Gate University.

Denise married young and had two daughters, Mariah and Marisa while going to college. After getting a divorce in 1983, she pursued work as a social worker for four years, including a year in Adult Protective Services in West County. Her original vision of being a businesswoman, briefcase in hand and wearing a business suit, came into being when she got a job with California's State Compensation Insurance Fund, where she worked for 27 years. Denise began as a loss control consultant in Oakland, working with employers to create a safe workplace. Through supervisory corporate positions, she became a recognized expert in workers' compensation insurance. Getting promoted to management levels, she was responsible for regulatory reporting, electronic storage of policyholder records. She founded the dispute resolution program and Quality Assurance of policy document output to policyholders and permanent records.

Denise earned a reputation of problem solving, designing and implementing changes in corporate processes, and managing large projects. Her last job assignment and one in which she did for 12 years, was as Director of Corporate Real Estate (first female in this position), where she was responsible for all real estate owned and leased by State Fund, as well as construction and remodel projects and facilities management. During her corporate real estate career, Denise started with the management of 1.8 million square feet to house 5,000 employees growing to three million square feet to house 10,000 employees. She retired in 2013. It was an exciting career.

Denise was a feminist before it became popular. Influenced by her grandmothers' and her mother's sense of independence, Denise kept her name, no Mrs. for her! Throughout her education and work history there were many mentors, from teachers who recognized her intelligence and encouraged her to go to college, to work mentors who encouraged her to take risks and to accept challenges. To this day, Denise continues to get together with her "glass ceiling club," a group of retired women who were the first females to rise to the highest levels of the organization (even the first female president and CEO), and who supported and mentored each other as they climbed the leadership ladder.

She met Pat Beckner, the love of her life, at the same time she became an empty nester. Pat being an only child always said "yes" when asked to do something. Denise embraced this philosophy and it is one reason why Denise is immersed in every avenue of OML's organization. She doesn't like to say "no."

After Denise joined the branch, she quickly became involved in public policy and attended many branch activities. She served as president in 2019-2021 and during the pandemic quickly got the branch up and running via Zoom meetings. She co-developed the Girls4STEM webinar series to introduce STEM professionals to high school girls during the pandemic. She also proposed and implemented the AAUW-encouraged DEI initiative in response to the George Floyd crisis, and guided our branch to AAUW National Five-Star status. She chaired the STEM Conference in 2022 and continues to participate in many interest groups of AAUW – OML, including helping many of them with technology issues. Denise is a giver, a doer and a leader who leads with a smile and a wonderful laugh!