

Five Questions With: Kim Bigonette



"We face different pressures than women from previous years."

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The Junior League of Rhode Island, a 90-year-old nonprofit, is recruiting new members to help carry out its mission of promoting voluntarism and developing the potential of women. The league has developed more than 16,000 members from Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts since it was founded in 1921. Those members have donated more than 2.2 million hours of service to more than 250 statewide nonprofit community partners.

The league currently partners with Amos House, a Providence social services agency that works with the homeless and poor, and The Autism Project of Rhode Island.

Kim Bigonette is president of the league's board of directors.

PBN: Junior League membership requires a firm time commitment to participate in fundraising, community service, and with the group. Why does this membership model work for your organization?

BIGONETTE: The Junior League of Rhode Island is a structured volunteer organization of women committed to promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women and improving the community through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. For over 90 years, the Junior League is a proven training ground for women to become community and civic leaders and learn how to effectively manage a non-profit organization, fundraise and develop impactful community service programs. We rely on our members to operate the organization and have a board of directors, several councils and committees. The Junior League of Rhode Island requires some commitment but the amount of time is largely up to the member and how they chose to fulfill their commitments. We most certainly offer flexibility because we understand that members have other responsibilities, such as work and family. Members are able to do self-directed shifts that correspond to our mission, as well. Our members are able to find commitments that meet their life style and adjust to their needs and expectations.

PBN: There has been much talk recently among female-centered organizations on the need for promotion of female leadership within the corporate and nonprofit sectors through executive level positions and board of director roles. How else do you think female leaders can encourage development of others to follow?

BIGONETTE: Over the years, priorities have changed for women. We face different pressures than women from previous years. Women are expected not only to take care of their families and run a household, but also balance work outside of the home. It is vital that female leaders have the opportunity to encourage the development of others through mentorship and camaraderie. This type of support can be a positive influence between women and helps them to step outside their comfort zone. Sometimes, you may not have the opportunity to learn a new skill in a corporate setting or at home. Organizations like the Junior League allow you to put your current skill set to good use and also present opportunities to learn new skills, or better yet, become a committee chair or board member. Many times, these opportunities lead to improved self-confidence and bring out a women's greatest potential in any area of life.

PBN: Why is volunteer work a good resume-building and networking tool?

BIGONETTE: Volunteer work shows that you can apply your skills, learn new ones, be flexible, and work in any type of an environment. Employers look at volunteer work positively. Volunteering is extremely invaluable on a resume. By volunteering, you show that you are supportive, have leadership potential, and can step outside your comfort zone. In the Junior League of Rhode Island, volunteer work is the tool we utilize to accomplish developing the potential of women. We train women to become

civic leaders so that we can help to build and improve our communities. Participation in The Junior League is a great networking tool within itself and it gives you added confidence to be a successful networker. Volunteering can open new doors career wise and socially. Sixteen years ago, I started volunteering while I had a career and then decided to stay at home once I started a family. I decided to continue my membership within the Junior League so that I could keep my skills fresh, learn new skills, and network with other women.

PBN: Why were the Amos House and Autism Project chosen as partners? How often do you change these partnerships?

BIGONETTE: The focus of the Junior League of Rhode Island is women and children at risk. We have provided over 90 years of service to building better communities. Over 255 community organizations have benefited from our volunteer efforts and some organizations with Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts continue to do so. Currently, we partner with organizations, such as Amos House and Autism Project for a two- to three-year period. The process in selecting our partners is based on need and chosen through a RFP process. However, we are in the process of changing our strategy in the way we select a focus and partnerships. We are going to be focusing on an issues-based community impact. Over the course of the past year or so, we have been working diligently on identifying issues that are currently impacting our local communities. We are identifying a need that we can address uniquely and want to raise awareness throughout the state. We would like to be known for our own project or program rather than just simply supporting a partner.

PBN: Who is the typical Junior League member? Why are they such a dedicated group?

BIGONETTE: The Junior League of Rhode Island is comprised of women of all races, religions, and national origins who demonstrate an interest and commitment to voluntarism. Our typical member is someone who simply cares to make a difference in the world and is dedicated to the impact the organization makes year after year. We are like-minded women who enjoy forming relationships with others who share the same common goals. Our goal is to promote voluntarism, develop the potential of women, and improve the communities around us.