

Women Leaders ... with Kelly Barbazette: Lesley Miles, 2022 Woman of the Year, harbors an entrepreneurial spirit

She and her husband redesigned the city council chambers, Granada Theater and much more

Published in the March 9-22, 2022 issue

By Kelly Barbazette

Lesley Miles, a local architect, is this year's Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce's Woman of the Year.

Building community is at the heart of every architectural project Lesley Miles has helped design throughout Morgan Hill and the greater South County — from the repurposed Granary and redesigned Granada theater to numerous schools and city projects including the Morgan Hill City Council Chambers and additions to the Centennial Recreation Center and library.

The two years she spent in her early 20s volunteer-teaching organic gardening in a remote Guatemalan village has informed her life design choices as a registered architect and the president of Weston Miles Architects.

"It was extremely isolated. No communication, no phone, water, roads, or electricity," Miles said. Living among 15 families who depended on one another taught her about community-building.

"I learned a lot about self-sufficiency and a lot about family, community and also about survival," said Miles, 67.



I recently had the pleasure of chatting with Miles about her life and the early beginnings of her and her husband's architecture and planning firm that has helped shape how people live and work in South Valley. Miles has received the distinction of Morgan Hill's Woman of the Year this year by the Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce. She, along with the other honorees, will be celebrated at an event April 3 at Guglielmo Winery.

Miles has consistently harbored an entrepreneurial spirit, operating from a "seat of the pants" attitude — and always with a back-up plan in her pocket. One hot summer day 38 years ago while trying to soothe her two-month-old colicky baby, she got the idea to launch a landscape design company. She had earned her bachelor's degree in horticulture with an emphasis in landscape design at the University of California, San Luis Obispo, where she met her husband, Charles Weston. She and Weston had moved to Morgan Hill a few years earlier to build a Waldorf school in town that they had designed. But when it became clear the project wasn't going to proceed, Miles pivoted. Her business grew when clients asked about designing houses, barns, and other projects.

"I learned I had a good head for business and finding new clients," she said.

By the mid-1980s, Weston had become a Registered Architect and licensed contractor, and they opened their office in December 1986, renting office space in downtown Morgan Hill. The company evolved to Weston Miles Architects, an architecture and planning firm, now celebrating its 36th year.

Miles began working more directly on architectural projects, taking the lead on running the business and business development. She drove the decision for their firm to follow the American Institute of Architects processes and professional guidelines. In the mid-'90s, she took the three-day grueling tests for architectural licensing and passed. She went on to incorporate their company and grew the practice to 14 employees in the early 2000s.

"I realized how much I enjoyed the architectural process and thinking that way," Miles said.

Their attention shifted early on from residential to educational and civic-oriented projects. With every new project, Miles views the design from the perspective of who will occupy it and aims to design it to best suit their needs while providing a new fresh perspective.

"Understanding what the architectural problem is that you're going to solve, appeals to me. As a kid, I loved detective novels," she said.

In 2003, the burgeoning company outgrew its office space, the Cornerstone Building, at Third and Monterey streets that they had built in the '90s and began their most challenging project — the redesign and reuse of the old Isaacson Granary on Depot Street. The once drafty agricultural building has since been skillfully renovated to preserve the building's character, and has become a model in green design.

"Having experienced a village community encouraged me to think about building and creating a place where community can happen," Miles said. "In Morgan Hill, saving history was important. What was Morgan Hill? Morgan Hill was an agricultural community. We wanted to save that concept."

Today, in addition to open spaces to wander and learn about history and sustainability, the Granary houses their office, Odeum Restaurant, Bike Therapy and the Running Shop and Hops, and 15 other businesses — all adjacent to an orchard of heritage fruit trees. The development has expanded to encompass condominiums. From the beginning the project proved to be a daunting task.

“There were 50-foot silos with 25-foot deep pits below them inside the building where the restaurant is now,” Miles recalled. “Taking those out and reconstructing the building was a huge undertaking.”

The community was slow to embrace the concept of green-building. Miles and Weston had attended the first annual green-building design conference in Austin, Texas, and wanted to apply the sustainable, efficient, and cost-saving building standards to the project. The Granary became the 25th LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified building in the world.

Miles delights in seeing the variety of people enjoying the project.

“I’m looking forward to sharing how important it is to create spaces that allow community to happen,” she said. “To allow us to meet each other and to be in a space where we can communicate. In particular these days, where there’s so much division, it’s important we have spaces to discuss things that are important to us as a community.”

Miles is grateful to Weston, her husband of 39 years, who has made it possible for her life to be full of family and work.

“Charles and I have always treated each other as equals in all phases of our family life and work life. That is not always the case, and I am extremely lucky to have found a true partner,” she said.

The couple have two daughters and four grandchildren, all of whom live nearby.

“As a working mother, my daughters experienced firsthand how important my career has been and are both enjoying their work,” she said.

Throughout her career, Miles said there has sometimes been a perception she is only assisting her husband in running the company.

“We don’t realize that many women still are not acknowledged for their accomplishments, and this needs to change.”

Besides continuing the firm’s work, Miles is working on her writing, which includes vignettes about being in the world as a woman, parent and grandparent, and writing a book about her time in Centro Uno, Ixcán, Guatemala, where she volunteered 45 years earlier.

“I needed to tell the story so that people could understand who these people are so that we can have more empathy and understanding. It’s way too easy to separate ourselves and say that’s them and this is us. And to have some understanding of the level of responsibility our government had and continues to have in Central America.”

In her free time, Miles enjoys hiking, exploring nature with her grandchildren and Border Collies, gardening, and reading. Asked what advice she’d give to other women pursuing their goals, she said to not be conflicted by expectations:

“Do what you love to do and if you’re in a relationship make sure you’re acknowledged and supported. If you have a family, model a life that shows joy and balance for work and play and remember to take a risk now and then. As we all know now ... you can’t plan everything and for almost everything there is a plan B!”