Eve Knudtsen is a pioneer. As one of the first women in the country to own and operate an auto dealership, she’s covered plenty of uncharted territory — foregoing the covered wagon for the modern day station wagon — blazing new trails for future generations of women.

“I admire Eve and the work she has done,” said Celeste D. Briggs, General Motors Director of Women’s Retail Network and Diversity Dealer Programs. “She’s a leader in the area of women in the automotive industry. She is committed to making a difference.”

Knudtsen is one of 257 female auto dealers in the United States — about 5 percent of the total dealers in America.

“The culture of the automotive industry is changing,” said Knudtsen. “It’s no longer an all boys club. Women have a voice when it comes to auto sales.”

Knudtsen has taken a successful operation and made it one of the top Chevrolet dealerships in the Northwest. She has worked as the principal dealer of Knudtsen Chevrolet in Post Falls for 21 years. Eve co-owns the dealership with her brother, Eric, and she serves as president.

Eve Knudtsen moved up from sales to auto dealer when her father, C. Wayne, signed over control of the family business to her and her brother in 1995. The transfer of ownership can be a complex process. “It takes all sorts of approvals from General Motors,” she said. “And it doesn’t happen overnight.”

Not everyone embraced the idea of a woman auto dealer. One regional manager found it difficult to believe that a woman was capable of handling the job, Knudtsen said. “He referred to me as a ‘Tomato,’” she said.

Despite that slight, the business move was approved. Then she pointed to a photograph taken of her signing the official dealership paperwork. “There’s my dad smiling and there’s the regional manager and you can see he’s sort of smiling,” she said.

Knudtsen relishes the challenge of being a woman in the automotive industry. Only 9 percent of the sales force is women and 17 percent of all industry employees are female.

“There is such an opportunity for women in the automobile business,” she said. “The No. 1 reason people said they bought the car that they did where they bought it is because they liked, believed and trusted the salesperson. Women do that better than anyone.”

Eve believes many women are better than men at listening — making them ideal for sales. “Women can be very successful in sales because they take on a consultant role as opposed to the traditional approach,” she said. “Female customers have tremendous buying power and why wouldn’t we want to appeal to them?”

It helps to have a manufacturing giant like General Motors supporting more women in the industry through its various programs, which include female support forums, leadership training programs and college scholarships.

“My role is to find ways to attract women into leadership roles,” said Briggs, who has helped the General Motors program for nearly 15 years.

“It’s a cultural shift that takes time. We’re in the sixth year of the Drive to Succeed Scholarship to target women entering automotive retail careers with college scholarships,” she said.

“We’ve given out $150,000 in scholarships as they pursue academic degrees and technical certification in automotive education.”

Knudtsen said the General Motors program helps provide something she didn’t have 20 years ago — a mentor.

She’s excited about that opportunity because her daughter is now working part-time for Knudtsen Chevrolet. “Lauren loves it,” Eve said. “That has been a pleasant surprise.”

While Knudtsen Chevrolet is celebrating its 77th anniversary this month, Eve isn’t looking in the rearview mirror.

“I don’t have time to reflect on everything because I am still going strong,” she said. “We’re growing and there is as much I want to accomplish here.”

For more information: http://www.knudtsen.com/

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