

Arkansas Business

Work Hard, Speak Up, AccelHERate Panelists Tell Women Entrepreneurs

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From left, Elizabeth Bowles of Aristotle United Communications; Janet Jones of The Janet Jones Co.; Michele Wright of My Water Buddy Inc. and My Learning Buddy Inc.; and Kimberly Smith of SILO Compliance System take questions after speaking at the AccelHERate event held on March 5. (Sarah Campbell-Miller)

Work hard, be consistent, never let your voice be silenced and go for it instead of sitting on your ideas.

That's just some of the advice four women business leaders had for the 30 or so mostly younger women who attended AccelHERate on Thursday at the Little Rock Technology Park. The event was sponsored by the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center.

Janet Jones

The first speaker was Janet Jones, who started her own real estate firm, The Janet Jones Co., in 1980. She grew up in the 1950s.

"I, frankly, thought that I would end up with a little home with a little white picket fence and flowers around it. And little children, and I would stay home and be a mom, and a homemaker and a wife," Jones said.



But life had other plans. Her husband divorced her to move to California and try to make it in the movie industry. She was left to care for their two young daughters.

Jones spoke about struggling to get hired because she didn't have any skills; she hadn't worked outside the home before then.

After a few rejections, she got a job as a receptionist at the accounting firm a friend's husband owned. Her job was to make copies and coffee and answer the phone.

After about a year, Jones wanted to do more. An acquaintance said she should sell real estate.

Jones asked a broker to sponsor her to take the licensure test, which she passed. She was eventually hired as an agent by the broker and worked for him for five years. "So I loved the real estate business from day one," Jones said.

Instead of looking for another job when that company began to struggle, she decided to start her own real estate firm.

The secret to her success, Jones said, was working hard, staying focused, being consistent and honest, and following the "golden rule" of treating everyone — from the CEO of a large company to a little old lady selling her home and moving into a nursing home — with respect.

She also said women have strengths that include patience; good communication skills; and a preference for collaboration that leads to win-win results.

Kimberly Smith

Kimberly Smith co-founded SILO Compliance System in 2012 and owns IP Launch Services LLC. SILO provides an anti-money laundering due diligence system.



Smith said she didn't come from a technology background. She doesn't code, and she's not a software developer.

Smith said she started the business because she had been a legal secretary and was frustrated with the system she used from 2004-2012 at a job based in London.

"It was just, it was awful. ... I couldn't risk rate my clients, there were the regulators and a lot more pressure on us to provide more data, and we just didn't have the fields in place," she said.

While Smith was in the midst of sending out resumes for a job in Denver, she spent a weekend designing a system on paper, with colored pencils, that she thought would work well for people like her.

Smith started calling software developers and, to her surprise, began to receive estimates. She read "Business Plans for Dummies" before approaching investors. A former boss of hers, who had retired, invested in her business.

Smith spoke about how, at first, she gave the system away to get testimonials from clients who used it to pass regulatory inspections. To be successful, she had to focus on marketing and advertising in multiple ways as well.

Smith agreed with Jones that hard work is critical.

"If I leave you with just three things that I've really learned ... don't overestimate your market. Don't overestimate your price points. And, and the third one is, also don't underestimate yourself," she said. "You are going to come across so many challenges but you will find ways to overcome them. Keep your networks; keep talking to people."

Elizabeth Bowles

Elizabeth Bowles, president and chairman of Aristotle Unified Communications, wanted to be president of the United States before she changed her mind, deciding secretary of state was "cooler." So she majored in international studies before attending and graduating from Vanderbilt Law School.



Bowles began her career at international law firm Arnold & Porter, doing patent litigation.

"And litigation is a man's world. I'm just telling you that right now. It definitely was in the early '90s," she said. "And there was one guy who did all the trials, and I called him the cowboy litigator," she recalled. "He was on his third wife, who had been a summer associate, and so she was probably 40 years younger than him. ... And I had to share a secretary with this man, and he used the secretary to schedule his tennis lessons. And he was very, very salty about the fact that we shared a secretary."

Bowles spoke about the time she'd had enough of his being rude to her. She knew he drank Diet Coke. So she bought a can, walked into his office, slammed it onto his desk, and told him that it wasn't her fault they shared a secretary and to leave her alone. She called it "the absolute best thing I could have done."

"That could've backfired, obviously," she said. "But it was a lesson for me about how I needed to conduct myself with particular types of people when you run into them in the world, and I run into them all the time."

The year she was to become partner, she left the law firm, because she hated it. She called her dad and asked for a loan to start her own law firm. He agreed. But then Marla Johnson with Aristotle called to suggest Bowles work for them instead. Her dad was chairman of the company's board at that time.

So she went to work for Aristotle, thinking it'd be a temporary stop, but Bowles ended up loving it.

"So what I love the most about it is it enabled me to build something," she said. "I think that's the most important thing is being able to build something."

She added that you have to want it, too, because running a business is a lot of work.

Bowles also spoke about her passion: bringing broadband access to rural communities, poor communities and communities of color. She believes that access is a necessity, not a luxury.

In 2018, her company won a \$12.2 million award at its Connect America Fund (CAF) Phase II auction. It will use that money to deploy broadband into unserved rural areas in Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri and Oklahoma.



To run a business, Bowles said, you have to be brave and bold. You need to have self confidence and trust in yourself and your ability to get it done, she said.

Bowles also advised the women in the room to learn to recognize the men who will be their allies, who will speak up and support them in rooms filled with men who want to silence them. And, she said, don't let yourself get shut down in the first place.

"Your voice is different. And it should be different. And what makes you different is what makes you strong," Bowles said. She added that "direct communication is the way to get your needs met, and the way to get where you want to be."

She also shared an anecdote about being at an event reception, in a bar, with a man who made an off-color remark about how seeing her on stage made him want to have sex with her.

She said attitude makes a difference in that kind of situation.

After ruminating on the remark for an evening, she said to herself, “You know what? Whose problem is that? Because he doesn't have a chance. So what do I care? You're gonna be really frustrated for a really long time.”

Bowles also advised the attendees to know what they want to do and why, play to their strengths, hire good people to do the things they aren't good at, and own any room they walk into.

Michele Wright

Michele Wright is CEO and founder of My Water Buddy Inc. She began by talking about all the ideas for new products she'd had — only to see other companies follow through and create those products. Being a successful entrepreneur is about having an idea and following through on it, she said. And it's important to have someone in your corner, a mentor.

Wright did follow through on an idea — My Water Buddy Inc., an entertainment brand with the mission to educate children on and promote the benefits of drinking water to children and their families.



The brand includes animated characters “Flowy” the blood drop, “Boney” the bone, “Whizzy” the brain, “Pumpy” the heart, “Gushy” and “Flushy” the kidneys, “Airy” and “Breezy” the lungs, “Brawny” the muscle and “Tummy” the stomach. The main character is “My Water Buddy,” a personification of water and the human body.

During the question-and-answer portion of the event, Wright told the audience to be more afraid of not starting a business than of starting a business and failing.

Each of the speakers encouraged attendees to take advantage of resources, including those offered by the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center.

Bowles added that they should join two types of networking/mentor groups: a woman-only group where the members understand what you're going through and are supportive; and another with men that mirrors the kind of environment they'll encounter as business leaders.

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