

Profiling: Women in Technology – Susan Cordts

By Mae Lee Sun

TNAZ Regional Correspondent



With a background in nursing, Susan Cordts now leads a company at the cutting edge of predictive data analysis.

It's a big leap from being a nurse. Perhaps. But nursing taught Susan Cordts that making good, informed decisions would lead to beneficial outcomes and make a difference in the lives of others. And that's all what Adaptive Technologies, Inc. [ATI] is about.

When she left United Regional Healthcare Systems in Texas where she went from hands-on patient care as a nurse to an administrative position as a nurse executive in 1998, Cordts moved to Phoenix and enrolled in an MBA program in marketing and finance at top ranked, Thunderbird School of Global Management. It was there that she laid the groundwork to become President and CEO of Adaptive Technologies, Inc., a privately held firm that specializes in business intelligence and predictive analytics software.

As brilliant and passionate as she is, Cordts is the first one to mention that getting to the top, or anywhere else in life, has little to do with making huge sums of money and everything to do with the love and support of others. In fact, she's walked away from large sums of options and shared stocks because she absolutely loves what she does.

"If you were to talk to any of my friends about understanding Susan, they'd say it's not about me. Understanding others and doing what is best for the greater benefit of all are motivating me. Some people would say 'Yeah right', to that, because I'm a CEO of a company, but it's true. At the end of the day, leaving a better world behind me is so very important. It makes for a richer, more exciting life. And I didn't get here alone.

"I had a father who always told me I could do and be anything I wanted and I believed him," she says. "I've also surrounded myself with people who also believed in me and gave me that extra push. It's not something I take for granted. I pay it forward by mentoring my colleagues and inner city kids who are trying to get to a different place in life and work on behalf of human rights to give people a hand up not a hand out."

"Anyone who thinks they succeeded by themselves is fooling themselves," she adds. In her early years, Cordts' worldview was initially shaped from growing up in civil rights era Mississippi. There was a 'hard ceiling' there she says where women did not even consider science or technology careers, let alone heading a corporation, as an option. Some of that she attributes to women not necessarily looking to themselves to fill leadership roles within the technology sector, even today. Finding a mentor can change that.

"Women have to understand how to put themselves forward to get attention," says Cordts. "They need to learn how to develop their passion and not be afraid to let their star shine. The opportunity arose for me when I decided to attend Thunderbird. It (undertaking an MBA) was risky because I was in my late 30s, had two twin boys and with obligations that didn't make it easy to change careers at that place in life," she says. Cordts had worked on a surgical robotics project with Steve Reid, now chairman of the board at ATI, who at the time was principal of Universal Robotic Systems.

"We sat down to discuss what worked and didn't work. I had dissenting ideas about it and he heard me. He was totally supportive and we could agree to disagree," she recalls.

The interpersonal dynamic between she and Reid and Cordts' keen grasp of scientific processes led to her being asked to join Reid in Germany and New York City to present on technology. Further discussions ensued on what Reid was trying to accomplish with the company. It was then that she was asked to lead the company's U.S. operations. Her mind for analyzing data was again linked to technologies ability to serve.

"Technology is about life but in supporting life, not replacing it," Cordts points out. "It allows humans to continue doing what they do well which is to come up with ideas on how to make things better, where technology is good at identifying patterns of risk like with the stock market or insurance exposure."

One of the key things about why Cordts sought to work for ATi is that the Company will take on projects that might not be financially valuable, but have a greater social value.

"We designed a product to predict the demographic of high school dropouts and identify what the early warnings are," Cordts notes. "Having that data changes the composition of what's going on and we as a company can make an impact. My work is not work, it's how I live," says Cordts.

She's currently entertaining the dream of being invited to Singularity University and exploring a third career in law.