

# WOMEN SHOW THEIR METTLE DURING COVID

BY DONNA JACKEL

When the country went into lockdown last March to slow the spread of COVID-19, non-essential businesses closed and many workers were furloughed or laid off. These momentous changes affected women more than men:



**Bobbie Goheen**



**Carrie Starr**



**Tina Paradiso**

From February and April 2020, the unemployment rate for women jumped more than 12 percent, compared to less than 10 percent for men, according to the Brookings Institute, a think tank.

Several studies indicate that while families were huddled at home, working mothers mostly shouldered the burden of childcare. Seventy-two percent of working mothers interviewed in a national survey of 2,200 adults conducted in April 2020 by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania reported being primarily responsible for childcare during the pandemic, compared with 33 percent of fathers. And in a September 2020 survey of 40,000 employees from 47 companies conducted by McKinsey & Company, mothers reported being more than three times as likely as fathers to perform the majority of housework and childcare during the pandemic. The women also said that their biggest challenges during COVID were: anxiety over layoffs or furloughs, burnout, mental health, childcare and/or homeschooling responsibilities, physi-

cal and mental health of loved ones and financial insecurity.

Local female entrepreneurs acknowledged there were struggles for women workers during the pandemic, such as shortages of manufacturing supplies, but also found resilience and enjoyed the flexibility of remote work.

Working at home allowed Carrie Starr to complete her postdoctoral degree sooner than expected. It also afforded her a greater connection to her family. If she accomplishes a work goal earlier than expected, she can take a walk with her husband or drive her child to school.

"I feel more in control of my work day," says Starr. "I feel I have that flexibility and that's empowering for women."

The flip side of remote work is it's easy to lose a sense of boundaries, Starr adds.

"There is a temptation to overwork because your computer is always right there."

It was due to COVID-19 that Starr changed careers. Previously, Starr was fundraising director for Roberts Wesleyan College and Northeastern Seminary.

"I couldn't do live fundraising events [during the pandemic] so instead I offered online mini classes for donors," she says. One of the classes, on women's leadership, attracted 400 women. That experience led to Starr's new position as executive director of the Community Institute at Roberts Wesleyan, where she creates online curriculum on workforce development and job skill training for the greater Rochester community.

"I think [COVID] has shown employers what women can really accomplish when given greater flexibility," says Starr. "Women have shined as problem solvers and innovators."

Tina Paradiso, president of Imprintable Solutions Ink, a printing and promotional

products and decorated apparel company located in the Neighborhood of the Arts, has a different reaction to COVID's impact on women professionals.

"Women have always had a harder time financially — being taken seriously," says Paradiso. "I don't think COVID exacerbated things for women."

Paradiso praised the Paycheck Protection Program — loans aimed at helping businesses maintain their workforces during the COVID crisis.

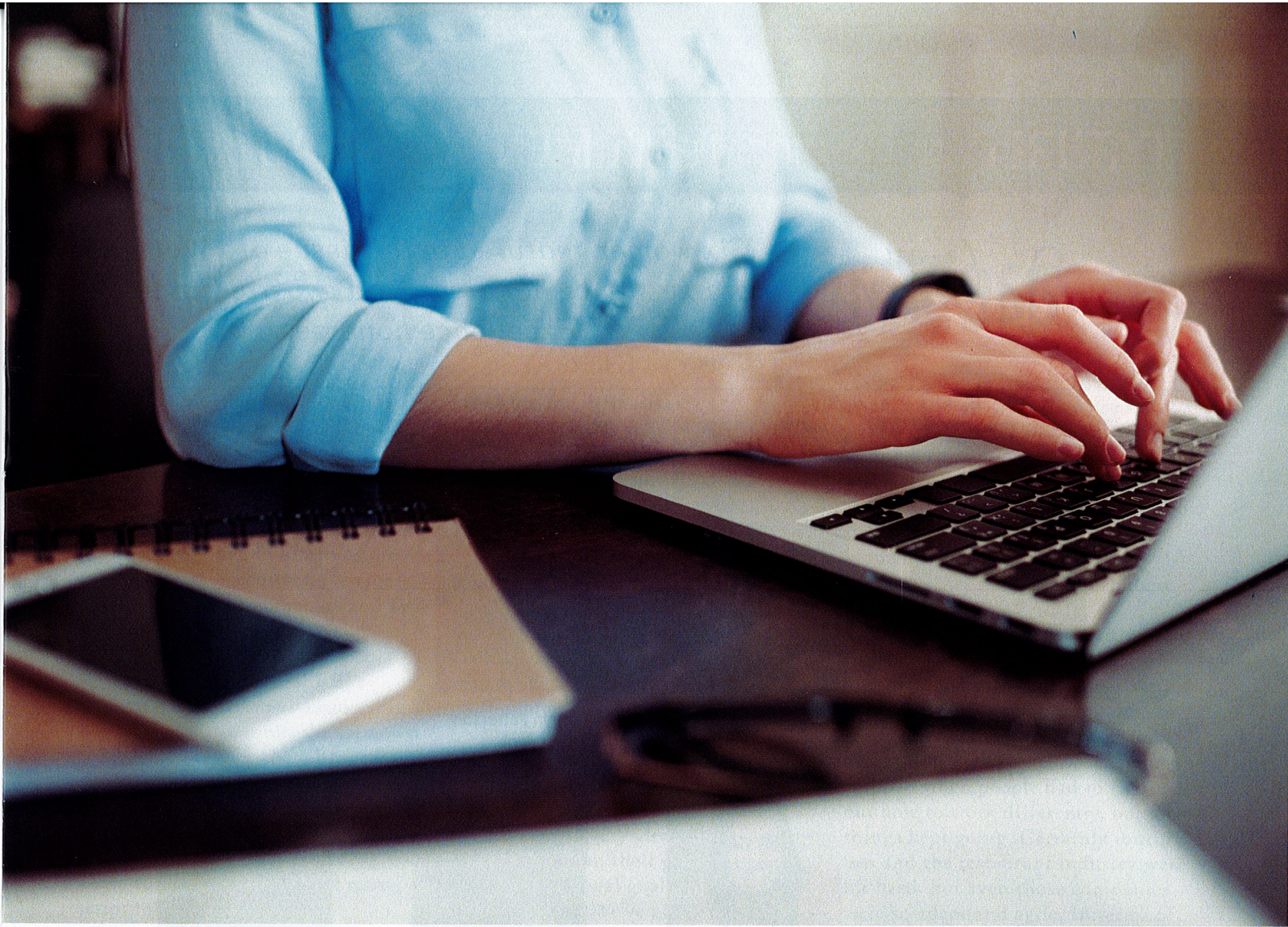
"They started doing PPP loans that heavily favored businesses that were women or minority owned," says Paradiso. "I got every piece of funding I applied for. If the government maintains and sustains these loans, it will help."

Paradiso never shut her business during the lockdown. Yet, she doesn't believe life for business owners will return to normal for another two years.

"We're still in survival mode," says Paradiso, who employs 14 workers, 10 of whom are paid interns — at-risk young adults from ages 16 to 24 who face obstacles, such as lack of housing or a high school degree. Under a program called Imprinting Lives, the young workers build job readiness and learn life skills, like setting up a bank account.

"My team shows up every day and pushes forward and wants to do more to keep this culture and company going," Paradiso says. She is hopeful that the societal injustices laid bare during the pandemic, namely the depth of poverty and racial disparities in the U.S., will remain in the forefront of public discourse and lead to policy changes.

Roberta "Bobbie" Goheen, president and CEO of Synthesis Management Group, a Fortune 100 company focused on business man-



agement consulting, does not believe upper and mid-level professional women lost ground during COVID. Rather, she says, many were promoted when colleagues left the workforce. Living and working under the restrictions of COVID created a more open mindset about flexible work, which has benefitted women executives, managers and supervisors, she adds.

Goheen credits the ability of career women to adapt to working at home to the fact they were already accustomed to multitasking in so many aspects of their lives.

"Remote work has created more freedom of choice for women," says the consultant. "They have taken the time not only to lead teams remotely, but they have also continued to accelerate their careers and be more present to the people in their lives. Women are built for this high level of change because they have a high level of empathy."

The consultant is now seeing women reset

to move forward in their careers.

"Women have the ability to say, 'We are not going to go back to where we were. We're going to continue to grow and develop as leaders.'"

Goheen acknowledges it was "crazy" times for women last year when they were working remotely and, in some cases, teaching their children.

"Those who tried to do their best and didn't fight the restrictions of COVID came through well," she says. She acknowledges that COVID hurt frontline workers who struggled pay for day care and care for family.

"The hard part of COVID was lockdown and losing so many people we love," says Goheen. "We'll be grieving for a while."

*Donna Jackel is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*

