

GEORGIANNA NICHOLS  
CenterPoint Energy's smart and savvy leaders  
blazed uncharted trails in a real man's world

by Richard Varr

Georgianna Nichols looks back upon her career with a broad smile. What started with an unnerving move to Houston in the 1970s, a resume in hand and an unbridled work ethic resulted in her reaching the top of the corporate ladder within a business dominated by a "real man's world" – the only woman to have done so at CenterPoint Energy's Houston Electric Division.

"I have no regrets – what a journey!" she said during an interview in CenterPoint Energy's downtown office tower. "I think of myself as a trailblazer in many ways. I had a great run and a great career. But I do think that women today have different kinds of challenges and can take it to a whole different new level because there are so many new opportunities and positions open to them."

But now, Nichols, President and Chief Operating Officer of CenterPoint Energy's division that delivers electric power to all of Houston, has decided to say goodbye to those she has considered as family since arriving here from St. Petersburg, FL, 30 years ago. Nichols is retiring.

"I'm leaving Houston and going back to St. Petersburg with a sense of sadness, having to depart this city 30 years later," she reflects.

With three children and six grandchildren, Nichols says her decision is not because she's ready to leave the work environment but desires instead to be with her family, hoping that retirement will bring a balance of family life and business opportunities in an advisory role or as a consultant.

"I see this chapter closing and a whole new life opening up," she says.

"For me it's mixed emotions," she adds. "It means that I have to leave my friends and home. But, I'm very excited about spending time with my family and grandchildren."

Nichol's success story stems from a risky relocation, comforted by hopes and dreams for a new beginning.

"We came to Houston in 1978 with \$200 in our pockets, a carload full of kids, a cat with a cast on its leg, a U-Haul and pickup truck," she recalls. "We rolled into Baytown and rented a house. To give you an idea what our neighborhood was like, our next door neighbor had a garbage pickup company, and a garbage truck was parked in the front. You get the picture."

“My husband and I both went looking for work, and 30 years later, look where we are today,” she adds. “To me, Houston is an incredible city that will embrace anybody; it is a city of incredible opportunity if you’re willing to work hard.”

When Nichols first took on her job hunt, she came armed with a degree in communications and scored an interview with Houston Lighting and Power as an advertising writer. But Personnel sent her to customer relations instead.

“They hired me, and I went to the field as a power consultant and never wrote a story in my life,” she says with a laugh.

Nichols says she became very attached to HL&P because it was a “family kind of company,” adding her father was a cable splicer for the telephone company.

“The guys in the field were near and dear to my heart. I was very much at home working with them. It was a good fit, and it’s been that way for a long time,” Nichols says.

She served on the job for two years and then left in 1980 to pursue a job in commercial real estate but returned to HL&P five years later. She continued working in the field of customer relations, and then moved on into marketing for five years. After that, she moved into the “real man’s world.”

“I was manager of contractor relations and was over the contract labor crews that did our field work,” she explains.

Nichols was also the first woman to take on this role for the company. How did it make her feel?

“Scare, but determined to do well,” she says. “I asked for that. I remember talking to the vice president at the time and said, ‘I never climbed a pole; I’m not an engineer, but I want to know this side of the business.’”

Six months later, she got the position. Nichols was promoted to a service area manager and then to vice president within the electric division in 1996. Her next positions were vice president of gas operations and then president of gas operations. And then, in 2005, Nichols was promoted to her current position.

In 2002, Texas Executive Women and *The Houston Chronicle* named Nichols as one of Houston’s 10 Women on the Move. She is a YWCA Outstanding Woman of Achievement/ Business 2003 Award winner and in 2006 was named the Girls, Inc. Strong, Smart and Bold Honoree.

She has served on the boards of the Society for the Performing Arts, the Houston Downtown Association and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. She’s also chair of the Utility Executive Committee for the University of Idaho.

During her tenure at CenterPoint Energy's Electric Division with its \$400 million operating income and \$400 million in capital spending, Nichols says she's seen a huge industry transformation in Texas and predicts further changes nationally and globally due to new technology. She says she's had to make her own transformations in the business units she's headed.

"I think I've been very successful in making turnarounds in those divisions. I always left them as well-run, efficient divisions with good earnings," she said.

"One of the things I'm most proud of is my employees. I certainly credit my success with the folks that have worked for me; you don't do it by yourself," she adds. "Good leaders always mentor those who are under them. I don't think enough leaders take the time to mentor and nurture those employees and develop them."

Her biggest challenge - just a month after taking on the job as president - was dealing with the evacuees of Hurricane Katrina. That's when CenterPoint Energy took command at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

"I think that's a great success story, and not a lot of people know that CenterPoint Energy set it up and managed it, including the volunteers, and processed all of those evacuees. That was a real demonstration of the kind of dedication the employees of this company have," she said.

Another challenge followed shortly with Hurricane Rita. Although Rita didn't directly hit Houston, it did cause power outages to more than 750,000 of the company's two million customers on the east side of CenterPoint Energy's service territory.

"That was a remarkable recovery to get everybody back up in about three and a half days," she says. "I'm really proud of that. It challenged everything we had."

She added, however, that moments leading up to the Category 5 storm coming ashore were agonizing, hoping that the company's nearly 5,000 Houston-area employees would be safe and realizing that she was in charge of restoring power to customers in a 5,000-square-mile area.

"If I ever had a moment of total terror it was then," she recalls. "I look back on it now and think it was one of the toughest, yet rewarding, times of my career."

Nichols says she's disappointed that although there are a lot of women in human resources, public relations, accounting and finance at CenterPoint Energy, not enough have worked their way into operations.

"We still don't have women in the pipeline to take roles like I have," she says. "I am sad and disappointed there won't be another woman's face coming up behind me to fill in the picture in the annual report."

“When I mentor young women, I really try to emphasize two things,” she continues. “It sounds like a cliché but the first is to simply follow your heart. You can always make a living if you’re really good at what you do. And, the second one is being able to understand and trust your instincts.

“Women are very intuitive. If they allow themselves to trust their instincts, they can go a long way. I think it’s important for women to know and follow that.”

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