

It's All About the People

BY RICH GUMBRECHT

There are few individuals more genuinely positive and upbeat than SFNet's own Michele Ocejo. On her 30th anniversary of joining SFNet, I took the opportunity to sit down with our heralded but unassuming director of communications and discussed the importance of relationships, making an impact, and the joy she gets from sharing people's stories.

Well, this is fun. After all your years of probing for insights, the shoe is on the other foot! Let's start by sharing with our readers a little about you. You know I like to tell people when I was a kid, I wanted to be an astronaut, a fireman, or a commercial finance executive, so

I'm living the dream! As a kid what did you want to be when you grew up? Did you always want to be in the media world?

From a young age, I had two passions: writing and animals. I started writing short stories when I was about eight. I also pretended I was a dog for a good part of my early life. Thankfully, my big brother (he's 12 years older) brought home a puppy for me when I was six. Saved me from years of therapy, no doubt. So, I knew I either wanted to be a veterinarian or something within the communications field. I realized as a vet I would probably go bankrupt as I could never deny services to someone in need who couldn't pay...so journalism was the logical path.

So how did you find your way to SFNet (the former CFA)?

The old-fashioned way: through an ad in *The New York Times* help wanted section. I interviewed with Bruce Jones, who was the

communications director at the time, and he called me back the same day to offer me the position.

What are some of your memories from those early days?

One thing that stands out: The lavish parties members would host at the convention. They would go all out with music, décor, food. I didn't travel extensively before starting my career, so traveling to New Orleans, Chicago, San Francisco, was exciting. I've also been able to meet so many interesting famous people through our events, such as Colin Powell, who gave me a bear hug.

How have the industry, the association and the ways we communicate changed over the years?

I can tell you one thing that hasn't changed: Stuffing the bags for the convention haha. You'd think we could automate that by now.

Seriously though, both the association and the industry have changed dramatically, but they have also remained the same in the important ways.

The association is still staffed with a small team of dedicated individuals. The industry is still a "relationship business." Our member lenders and factors truly get to know their clients and they are dedicated to helping these companies thrive.

The association has evolved dramatically. One example: For the majority of its existence, only lenders and factors could be members. Several years ago, that changed to include "service providers"...definitely a change for the better.

There is still progress to be made, but the increased diversity in the industry over the years, especially pertaining to gender, has been a positive change. I'm hopeful that the increased focus on DEI initiatives and the efforts to bring in the NextGen of secured finance professionals will continue this progress.



■ **MICHELE OCEJO**
Secured Finance Network



■ **RICHARD D. GUMBRECHT**
Secured Finance Network

You've broken a lot of news and interviewed a lot of important people. What stands out as some of your favorite experiences?

Creating and publishing the very first Women in Secured Finance issue, which has become our most-read issue every year. I enjoy connecting with and reading the stories of these amazing women, whether they are CEOs or have just a few years of experience. We average about 60-70 profiles in each issue.

In this year's Member Survey, *The Secured Lender* magazine and *TSL Express* were rated the highest valued SFNet offerings. You've done so much for our community over the years. What are you most proud of?

That is a tough question. I would say I'm proud of the benefits our content and our service, in general, has provided to the community. I've received so much feedback over the years, whether it's an email thanking me for my quick reply to a question or a conversation in which someone comments on how informative a certain article was, it all means so much. We all want to know that our hard work is noticed and has made an impact.

As far as the magazine and *TSL Express*, I have to share those accolades with our senior editor, Eileen Wubbe, who has been here for 18 years, and our art director/operations director, Aydan Savaser, who has been here 13 years. We've worked together a long time and I couldn't do this without them.

You are always so upbeat and your passion for your work shows through. What do you enjoy most about what you do?

Number one, it's the people I work with, which includes my coworkers as well as our members.

Number two, as part of a small staff, we all wear many different hats. I love a challenge and figuring out solutions to a problem.

I also enjoy acquiring new abilities. For example, when you asked me to get involved with our advocacy efforts and become the liaison for the Advocacy Committee, I knew nothing about this aspect of SFNet's offerings. It has been exciting and truly eye-opening to learn about how the "sausage gets made," legislatively speaking.

Many of our community feel like they've known you for years. Tell us something that might surprise us.

I love old cemeteries. I can spend hours wandering in them. Some people find it creepy, but I find them peaceful.

It seems fitting that someone who has made a career celebrating lives well lived is building quite a legacy of her own. 🍷



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