Interview with Betty Hernandez, Retiring President of SFNet

BY MICHELE OCEJO

Betty Hernandez, executive vice president-chief credit officer of SLR Business Credit, reflects on her year as SFNet president, including new programs and events launched during her tenure and opportunities in the year ahead.

Tell us what you are most proud of from this past year?

There are many things that I'm proud of from this year of being SFNet's president. As part of our strategy to strengthen our role as the nexus of secured lending, I have been interviewed by several media outlets, including PitchBook, FundFire, 9Fin, LSEG and Bloomberg. Since I work for SLR, a specialty finance platform, topics discussed included the current state of private credit and the overall secured lending market environment. Through these discussions, I, together with others from SFNet, have been able to showcase some of the important work our association is doing, including our Fraud Task Force and industry Data Surveys, both of which provide members with valuable real-time insights about the market and emerging risks. The Fraud Task Force, in particular, brought together industry leaders to study the evolving threat landscape, identify common fraud schemes and share best practices to help lenders strengthen controls and safeguard portfolios. The Task Force also hosted three webinars.

I'm also proud of how SFNet continues to innovate and respond to changes in our industry. This year, our Technology & AI Committee launched SFNet's first-ever AI and Technology Conference, Reimagined: AI & Automation in Secured Finance. The response exceeded all expectations. The event sold out within days, and demand was so strong that we added a virtual attendance option to accommodate additional participants. The conference demonstrated that our members are eager to embrace new technologies and better understand how AI can enhance operations, improve risk management and shape the future of secured finance.

Another accomplishment is our continued investment in talent development. SFNet has long been committed to mentoring, and this year we introduced a new Reverse Mentoring Program that flips the traditional model by pairing younger professionals with senior executives. The goal is to create meaningful two-way learning opportunities around technology, innovation, workplace culture and generational perspectives. I believe programs like this help ensure our industry remains relevant, adaptive and attractive to the next generation of leaders.

Finally, I am extremely proud of the growth and impact of our Women in Secured Finance community. This year's Women in Secured Finance Conference achieved record attendance and delivered tremendous energy, engagement and networking opportunities for attendees. It is rewarding to see this group continue to grow and play such an important role in advancing leadership, professional development and inclusion across our industry.

When I look back on the year, what stands out most is SFNet's ability to bring people together, create meaningful opportunities for learning and connection, and provide leadership on the issues that matter most to our members. That's something I am incredibly proud to have been a part of.

What surprised you about being SFNet president?

As part of my duties as SFNet president, I am chairing this year's Hall of Fame nominations. I was surprised at the dedication and great lengths that some of our other committee members would go to identify potential "pioneer" Hall of Fame candidates. I couldn't believe the effort and research that went into this. One member traveled across several states to cull through dozens of boxes and past meeting minutes. This is just one example of how much our volunteers do.

BETTY HERNANDEZ
SLR Business Credit

What opportunities do you see in the years ahead for both the industry and the association?

During last year's Annual Convention, I was approached by some individuals interested in forming an SFNet Chapter in Mexico. For the last few months, we have been in discussions to see how SFNet could benefit the secured lending community in Mexico. We are still formulating a strategy and have assembled a boots-on-the-ground group of service providers and lenders who are certain that our chapter model will benefit their community. I'm anxious to see how this will develop over the next year.

I think our Chapter network is a "hidden gem." It is the lifeblood of our community. This is where I started and see many opportunities for the chapter network to keep growing and thriving.

I think there is great potential in our trade association Partner Alliance program. This was initially introduced by Jennifer Palmer, and we have continued to expand this program where SFNet members can connect with other trade association members to identify opportunities where we can assist in providing working capital to their members, such as the distillery industry, for example. (Editor's note: See content starting on page 38) I see great potential where all can benefit.

I can tell you one thing that I'm not surprised by, and that is how hard the SFNet staff works. This is a well-oiled and experienced team of professionals, many of whom have been working together for a long time. They support me in any way that I ask of them. Whether it is to coordinate my media training, or social media posts promoting SFNet, or coaching me for on-stage appearances at the conference, they are there every step of the way. I'm very grateful for their support. I couldn't have done it without them and, of course, Rich Gumbrecht.

Any advice/tips for incoming president, Stewart Hayes?

I've been in our industry for over 36 years. Stewart has been involved longer than I have been. There isn't much advice I can offer him that he doesn't already know. I learn from Stewart each time we meet. After all, he is a Hall of Famer! My only advice is to continue to rely on the staff. It is not easy working a full-time job and also being president of a dynamic association. The SFNet staff and team of volunteers are always willing to help.

Michele Ocejo is SFNet director of communications and editor-in-chief of The Secured Lender.