

# Trailblazers: The Women Presidents of AGA



In AGA's 70th anniversary year, the *Journal* pays tribute to the women who have served as AGA National President, their legacy, leadership, and contributions to the government accountability profession. From the first female National President Eleanor Clark (30 years after AGA was chartered) to the eighth, current National President Wendy Morton-Huddleston, a common theme underpins their presidential terms — trailblazing and resiliency. All led AGA through significant changes and turbulent times, including government fiscal austerity, reinvigorating participation of members from state and local governments, transforming AGA's educational programs, increasing AGA's value proposition, galvanizing membership growth campaigns, and now a global pandemic! In 2021, it is time to reflect on progress, invigorate passion and commitment to break barriers, challenge the status quo, and inspire more women to lead.



## **Eleanor Clark (1981–1982)**

Eleanor Clark, CGFM, is remembered not only for shattering AGA's presidential glass ceiling but even more for leading the transformation of AGA's educational programs. Former CFO for the Federal Housing Administration and an international financial management consultant,

Clark was responsible for restructuring AGA's Professional Development Conference (PDC — now Professional Development Training, or PDT) to provide more substantial, in-depth technical training. She focused on continuing professional education as the hallmark of AGA's commitment to the government financial management profession.

*"Ellie Clark did such an excellent job as National President that it was never a question again that a woman could provide the leadership that the membership needed."*

~ Past National President (PNP)  
June Gibbs Brown



## **Virginia Robinson (1989–1990)**

The third woman to serve as national president, Virginia Robinson, CGFM, said Brown's success inspired her to pursue AGA's highest national office. She continued to invest in state and local government members by appointing the first representative from that sector to

the National Executive Committee. Robinson's notable legacy in AGA is quite literally its continued existence because AGA's finances had significantly deteriorated by the time she took the helm. With the help of a group of dedicated members, Robinson assured AGA's fiscal sustainability by the end of her term.

*"The great honor of being AGA National President is in the tremendous opportunities for growth for the individual and our organization while contributing to the improvement of financial management throughout our nation."*

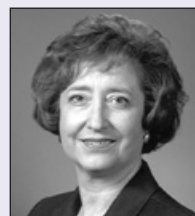
~ PNP Virginia Robinson



## **June Gibbs Brown (1985–1986)**

June Gibbs Brown, CGFM, was also a trailblazer in the profession and in AGA. As a former inspector general of federal agencies, Brown focused her presidential agenda on recruiting and retaining members from state and local governments, who seriously questioned

the value of participating in a Washington-based organization led mainly by federal employees and consultants. She not only turned around that perception but also shepherded passage of a resolution to ensure the national president hails from outside Washington every few years. Her investment of time and energy reaped enormous benefits for AGA. Today more than half the membership comes from state and local government.



## **Virginia Brizendine (1995–1996)**

AGA's first female National President from the state and local sector was Virginia Brizendine, CGFM, who served in Missouri state government. Inspired to national service by Brown's leadership at PDC, she championed AGA's education program, launched

a membership campaign, and then set her sights on the CGFM certification program, aiming for 10,000 CGFM's by the end of her term. This figure was significantly higher than AGA's Professional Certification Board thought possible but, with Brizendine's leadership in an aggressive campaign, AGA surpassed the goal by certifying 13,000 CGFM's by the end of the grandfathering period.

*"Until you have been National President, you don't realize how much time and energy other presidents have given to this organization."*

~ PNP Virginia Brizendine

AGA's legacy of women leaders is just beginning. The demonstrated capability and success of the eight women presidents — in place during some of AGA's most challenging years — is already inspiring the next generation. When asked to share their wisdom with women who aspire to AGA leadership, most of our women PNP's said the same thing: "Demonstrate confidence." AGA encourages all of its members — women and men — to step up with confidence to volunteer at the chapter or national level, knowing AGA's leaders stand ready to support and encourage you.



### **Lisa Casias (2010–2011)**

More than a decade after Brizendine, Lisa Casias, CPA, became AGA's national president. Her theme, "Embracing Change," reflected the long-term fiscal turbulence of the times. She recognized that strategic priorities should meet members' needs in the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act era of "doing more with less." Casias led the first update in seven years of AGA's strategic plan. She reached out to members and past leaders to listen to concerns and increase AGA member value through outcome measures.

*"I was hesitant to take on leadership roles because I thought I was too busy with work and home activities, but when I became president of AGA's DC chapter, I realized this is an organization of passionate, invested volunteers who work together to make things happen. I reaped tremendous professional benefits from AGA membership and leadership roles at the chapter and national levels."*

~ PNP Lisa Casias



### **Evelyn Brown (2012–2013)**

Genetics may have influenced the next woman who became national president. Evelyn Brown, CGFM, is the sister of PNP Virginia Robinson, whom she calls her mentor. She credits Robinson with inspiring her to mentor others in their careers and AGA leadership pursuits.

Her presidential theme — the "4 E's: Education, Experience, Examination & Ethics" — make up her core advice to mentees. Her presidential agenda focused on a financially viable organization by strengthening members and chapters. Brown also worked to increase membership diversity through outreach to peer groups, including the Native American Finance Officers Association.

*PNP Evelyn Brown, CGFM, learned from her sister, PNP Virginia Robinson, CGFM, to encourage those she mentored with this axiom: "You can do the job as well as anyone. You don't have to know all the answers; you just have to know where to get them."*



### **Mary Peterman (2013–2014)**

Women exchanged AGA's presidential gavel for the first time when Mary Peterman CGFM, CPA, took the helm as the first national president from one of AGA's corporate partners. Having spent most of her career in local, state and federal government positions,

Peterman joined the private sector just before the nominating committee selection. She recognized the groundbreaking aspect of accepting the role but felt a duty to invest her knowledge and experience in AGA and its members. Because of a governmentwide prohibition on conference attendance, a poorly attended PDC caused AGA's first deficit in 10 years. As a cost-saving measure, Peterman held the first virtual AGA board meetings and worked with staff to expand virtual training opportunities. She also led the recruitment of a replacement for retiring executive director Relmond VanDaniker and helped hire AGA's first woman CEO, Ann Ebberts.

*"While I am so honored to have worked to overcome challenges, I am most proud of our collective investment to recruit and hire AGA CEO Ann Ebberts. Every national president wants and has had the opportunity to influence AGA's future — and this was mine."*

~ PNP Mary Peterman



### **Wendy Morton-Huddleston (2020–2021)**

Wendy Morton-Huddleston, CGFM, PMP, took office in unprecedented times — in the midst of a global pandemic, an economic recession, and declarations for equality across the U.S. During AGA's first (and very successful) virtual PDT, the gavel exchange

ceremony was attended online by more than 2,200 people in the continental U.S., Hawaii, Guam and New Zealand. With the theme "Legacy, Leadership & Transformation," she issued a call to action — the Power of 7 — for members to recruit at least seven new members, sponsor seven students to attend national or chapter events, and donate time and resources to seven not-for-profit organizations. She is proud to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in AGA through the recently launched Council for the Advancement of Women.

*"Encourage women to pursue leadership opportunities at the chapter and national levels, to grow with experience and build confidence. Workplace influencers and decisionmakers must cultivate a pipeline of gender representation and institute accountability in succession planning. We invest together to promote a diverse reality."*

~ AGA National President Wendy Morton-Huddleston

# AGA's Council for the Advancement of Women

## *A Journey of Progress, Purpose and Potential*

**G**ender inclusion and parity are essential in the journey to diversity. In hopes of encouraging a wider variety of backgrounds, expertise and perspectives among AGA leaders, the National Governing Board (NGB) approved a diversity and inclusion statement in December 2019.<sup>1</sup> It declares the value of diversity to enhance AGA membership and promote a culture of respect for varying demographics and perspectives. In May 2020, AGA launched its Council for the Advancement of Women. Then-National President Ernie Almonte (2019–2020) introduced the concept during his tenure and collaborated with Wendy Morton-Huddleston, then National President-Elect, to formalize the council with a governing charter. The NGB appointed two co-chairs: Tracey Walker, vice president and

national director of government affairs, culture, diversity and inclusion at RSM LLP, and Gwendolyn Sykes, CFO of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Secret Service. Council members include: Malena Brookshire, Kim Farington, Thalia Melendez, Elena Tercero, AGA National President Wendy Morton-Huddleston, AGA Past National President Mary Peterman, AGA CEO Ann Ebberts, and AGA COO Susan Fritzlen.

The council's vision statement is expansive: "AGA aims to create and foster a [body] that reflects and contributes to the diverse profession and association membership. We take a collective responsibility to create an association where members feel included, respected and empowered."<sup>2</sup>

### THE IMPERATIVE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

In addition to chartering the Council for the Advancement of Women, AGA aimed in 2020 to increase diversity in panel demographics and offer more educational opportunities that feature guiding principles of inclusion and inspirational insights. For example, Virtual PDT 2020 in July included:

- **Strength Through Diversity: How Differences Build Resiliency and Project Success**, with panelists Reed Waller of the Bureau of the Fiscal Service, U.S. Department of the Treasury, Taka Ariga of the Government Accountability Office, and Tracey Walker of RSM.
- **6th Annual Women's Forum: "The Power of Being You,"** where Walker, a D&I expert, advised, "One-on-one, state your goals at the outset but also state your fears — 'I may say something awkward; I may say something that is misunderstood.' But if people understand that your intent is positive and you are vulnerable, then you start to establish a level of trust that allows you to deliver feedback."

AGA's annual **Internal Control & Fraud Prevention Training** in September 2020 closed with a presentation by 2019 Woman Cybersecurity Leader of the Year Theresa Payton, who became the first female CIO at the White House during the George W. Bush Administration.

"Let's continue to empower women to be resilient and courageous and to see themselves in leadership roles and as assets in boardrooms," implored Morton-Huddleston. "In AGA, we can cultivate and realize gender diversity as we press forward for another 70 years."





**Women’s workplace advancement is not only a business issue; it is an imperative for organizations public and private that want to remain competitive in a global environment. It is also an imperative for AGA, as we have an opportunity to enrich, enhance and advance women, which drives perspective, innovation and higher performance in the future.**

~ Tracey Walker, co-chair, AGA’s Council for the Advancement of Women



The council aims to facilitate gender equality in AGA and diversity on the NGB, National Council of Chapters (NCC), and Leadership Development Committee, in chapter roles, training programs, and professional development.

“The council is a progressive commitment to diversity. We intend to actively cultivate the association we imagine, one we are proud of, one that will help our profession by empowering women to pursue leadership opportunities courageously,” said Morton-Huddleston, now AGA National President.

The council charter sets the foundation to measure and report on general progress toward equality. Council membership

reflects current AGA demographics from federal, state and local governments, academia and private industry and includes men as allies in promoting gender equality and advancing council objectives. This model aims to cultivate inclusive representation and expand sponsorship possibilities. It will follow a strategic framework through 2021 to engage individual members and chapters and strengthen women’s success and impact in AGA.



## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AT WORK

For nearly a year, COVID-19 has made an acute impact on the workforce, specifically on women’s careers. According to McKinsey’s 2020 *Women in the Workplace* report, the pandemic intensified challenges women already faced, such as “double duty as working mothers, pressures of homeschooling, childcare, eldercare, and other competing priorities.”<sup>3</sup> Black women are coping with the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the black community, such as a lack of access to COVID testing, unemployment, and repeated instances of violence against black men and women.”<sup>4</sup>

The emotional tax and bias that people of color face daily in organizations worldwide require all of us to educate ourselves in ways to correct bias and lead inclusively.<sup>5</sup> Women in leadership risk dialing back their careers, foregoing advancement, or exiting the workforce. As a result, it becomes a business imperative and call to action to accelerate programs such as flexible work arrangements, pipeline parity checks and balances, wellness benefits, and professional development training.

In AGA, let’s do our part to create a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion through the recruitment, retention and advancement of women members. We must champion equality and repudiate a microaggression mindset that instills doubt with such questions as: *Can working mothers lead or are they too busy? Can they attend after-hour networking events to build relationship capital? Do they have the aptitude to assume the demanding, complex, high-profile assignments historically offered to men?* The national presidents showcased on these pages prove that women learn, lead and thrive. As a dynamic association, AGA can empower professional women and transform their careers.

~ AGA National President Wendy Morton-Huddleston, CGFM, PNP

The *Journal* is grateful for the contributions of National President Wendy Morton-Huddleston and PNP Mary Peterman in the research and writing of these features on AGA’s trailblazers and Council for the Advancement of Women.

### Endnotes

1. [www.agacgfm.org/diversity](http://www.agacgfm.org/diversity)
2. [www.agacgfm.org/womenscouncil](http://www.agacgfm.org/womenscouncil)
3. McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org. *Women in the Workplace 2020*, Oct. 2020.
4. LeanIn.org. *The State of Black Women in Corporate America*, Aug. 2020.
5. [www.catalyst.org/research-series/emotional-tax/](http://www.catalyst.org/research-series/emotional-tax/)

