

# IALD SOUTHEAST US

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## Spotlight: WBE's and female business owners

by Carrie Walker



WBE stands for Women Business Enterprise. We have several woman-owned lighting firms in our chapter, though not all are WBE's. I sent a short list of questions to some of our chapter's women about their experience as a WBE or business owner. In my personal experience, women make up the majority of students pursuing lighting degrees or as employees at lighting firms, while men tend to be the majority of firm owners. For this reason, I wanted to recognize these women in our chapter.

Top Row: Florin Panlilio, Melinda Streit, Nikki-Nicole Miles, Dianna Osickey, Hilary Wainer  
Bottom Row: Aerin Thomson, Andrea Hartranft

### What encouraged you to start your own business?

Florin: I had always planned to start my own business. What finally motivated me was a negative experience I had starting a new job. During the process, I doubted myself. After speaking with several colleagues, I realized that no two designers are created equal. We have different ways and means, but we are all valuable. So I registered my business and launched my website /social media in two weeks.

Aerin: After years of immersing myself in the world of lighting, I discovered my true passion as an independent designer. The long commute to work made me realize I needed more flexibility to pursue my dreams while being present for my family. The support and encouragement from other women in the industry reinforced the idea that my work could bring value to my community. This motivated me to take the leap and start my own business.



Melinda: We've been in the lighting industry for quite a while. We recognized that there was a disconnect between lighting design and the way that lighting equipment was sold commercially, and that the independent lighting designer was the solution. Danny, my husband and Design Director, had dreamed of opening a lighting design firm for many years. When the opportunity came, we moved to Nashville and began DHS Lighting Design.

Nikki-Nicole: At the height of my career I moved from the west coast to North Carolina for family reasons and found myself jobless. The traditional role of a Lighting Designer was hard to find and for some unheard of. Being an enthusiastically courageous mom, I stepped out on faith. The job I needed was nowhere to be found, so I created my own. When no one else believed in me, I did!

Dianna: I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit, and I realized that to pursue lighting design in my area of East Tennessee, I needed to establish my own business. It was essential for me to position myself as an independent design resource for local design teams. L+ARC has also benefited from having a male co-founder, as he brings a different perspective.

Hilary: That's a complicated story. Ultimately, I had developed the skill set to do so and I just needed to take a big dose of courage....so I did.

Andrea: I had financial backing and support from my family. I was at an age where it was "now or never" and while I wasn't particularly interested in running a company, I took the leap.

## **What challenges or rewards have you seen in that effort?**

Florin: The main challenge with any new business is the inconsistency of revenue. I was ready to give up at one point, but my husband encouraged me to keep going because it hadn't been a year anyway. The rewards are instant. Working with clients that rely on you for guidance, and hearing them say they like what you presented and are excited is priceless. Having the freedom to do whatever you want on a project is incomparable. Managing your own time does not necessarily mean you work fewer hours, but you're able to juggle your roles as a Mother, a wife, and a Lighting Designer in your own time.

Melinda: When we first moved to Nashville, we soon noticed that the design community seldom collaborated with lighting design firms. We have had many discussions, meetings, and presentations to educate designers on the benefits of utilizing a lighting designer on their projects. It's an ongoing conversation, but when they arrive at the conclusion that engaging a lighting designer is to their advantage, it makes all the effort worth it.

Hilary: Work-life balance. Trying to sort out auxiliary staffing. A small business really needs 5-10 hours a week of about 5 different skill sets (marketing, admin. book-keeper, etc.) and even if you put those individuals on contract, there is no loyalty or they aren't working when you need them and/or they simply aren't that invested in your company.



Nikki-Nicole: Wearing multiple hats to keep “things running”, the long nights, and working on weekends can be tough when the business relies on you. But it is truly rewarding to see an idea come to fruition. The clients, sales agents, and consultants I’ve met and teamed with have been so supportive and a great joy to work with. They motivate me when frustration sets in. It’s hard to believe that I can walk into design spaces and there are very few women and specifically any that look like me. Getting a seat at the table is still a challenge.

Dianna: Building a market and client base from scratch is time-consuming, emotionally challenging, and incredibly rewarding. We often say, “the highs are high and the lows are low.” Maintaining consistency in all aspects of running a business is particularly tough at the outset, especially knowing that you’ll be learning as you go. The sense that we are all in this together really helps me get through the long days. I truly appreciate working alongside creative architects and designers who are pushing their boundaries—experimenting with new techniques, exploring materiality, and researching sustainable practices, all while juggling tight deadlines. I admire the tenacity that working in the architecture and design field demands.

Aerin: Defying social expectations, building a support network by myself, building a company from the ground up, & personally coping with fear of failure as I have always placed high expectations on myself. But the rewards from all that hard work have allowed me to see that I can pave the way for greater gender equality in entrepreneurship & build a woman-owned business that can thrive without being undervalued in this market.


Andrea: It is exhausting and somewhat terrifying, especially if you have no business training – if you are responsible for other people’s financial wellbeing– the stress of payroll can be overwhelming. However, the rewards of watching young designers thrive, of being part of something that makes the world a little bit better through light and growing something that you, in essence, planted, can be worth it.

## **What advice would you give someone applying to be a WBE?**

Melinda: Do it! It has been helpful to our business. It offers opportunities that your business may not have had otherwise, allows for diverse perspectives, and I believe that design firms like knowing that they are working with and supporting women and minority -owned businesses.

Dianna: Think about your business structure on the front end, especially if you have partners. I’ve found it challenging to quantify the value of being a WBE, which can make advocacy difficult at times. The application process can be lengthy and complex to navigate. While we haven’t pursued federal WBE status and have focused on state and city credentials, I continuously reevaluate that decision. My advice is to connect with other WBE businesses in the design community—such as landscape architects and others—to see how beneficial it has been for them in your area. Regardless of credentials, your business holds value, and you can always pursue these certifications later, provided your initial business structure is in place.

Hilary: Be very detail oriented when putting your application together.



Aerin: You can do it! But it will take time! Do your research and in my case, I reached out to my social SBA location (U.S. Small Business Administration) center. That is a great place to get started!

Andrea: Make sure you keep good records, learn to use QuickBooks (or something similar) because you will need to pull financial data, make sure you get your tax returns as electronic files because you will need to send them too. Every state has different requirements, but there is overlap. Some states have reciprocity. Most states have very nice people that are willing to guide you through the process if you are struggling - let them help you

### **What advice can you offer women thinking of starting their own business?**

Florin: Be Brave. Believe that you are where you are because you belong there.

Melinda: Research your industry market, know the problem you want to solve for your clients, know who your client is and isn't, never stop learning, never stop listening, and make certain that you love what you're doing because you're going to spend a lot of time in this endeavor. Also, be prepared to work very hard. Hire the people who know more than you do about certain aspects of the business. You don't have to know everything—you just need to hire the people who do!

Nikki-Nicole: Follow your heart. Listen to your "woman's intuition". When things get tough, because they will, light your own path!

Dianna: Create a plan and be open to regularly reevaluating both your short- and long-term goals. Priorities shift, our culture evolves, and it can all feel overwhelming. Surround yourself with positive individuals whom you admire; they can be invaluable for brainstorming and serving as a sounding board.

Hilary: Sit down and have a very serious "discussion" with yourself about your weaknesses and come up with a strategy to deal with them before you start your own business. Talk to as many people as possible who have started their own business (in design or other). Ask them what their best decision was as a new business owner and what they wished they could have known before going into the business.

Aerin: Go for it! Trust me, there is a whole community of people that want to see you succeed you just have to put in the hard work to build the right people to support you & be willing to do all the research to find your answers. Take it one day at a time, one solution at a time. It won't happen overnight, but one day you'll look back and want to give yourself a great big hug for taking that leap of faith!

Andrea: It is not for everyone - make sure it is right for you. Ask a lot of questions and listen to the answers. Leave your ego home - you will make mistakes - learn from them - it's going to be ok, or it won't - and that's also ok. Be kind, say thank you a lot - it will help you immensely. Make sure you have an excellent bookkeeper and a lawyer capable of explaining things in simple terms. Listen to both of them. Have fun - if there is only stress and no joy, what is the point?