

# Robertson cultivates art of real estate



Dan Carter/DJC

Norris, Beggs & Simpson Chief Financial Officer Jan Robertson never lost her love for art. In addition to looking after her company's finances, she also handpicks all of her office's artwork.

The financial officer once dreamed of working in the arts. Now she keeps her passion alive by promoting education to young people in Portland

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If Jan Robertson weren't the chief financial official of one of the largest real estate firms in Portland, she'd probably be an arts educator. Or she'd be designing sets and lighting for theater productions.

Her passion is art. Her profession is real estate. And it's not quite as dualistic as it seems.

Robertson attended three universities but never graduated. At the University of Kansas she studied art. At the University of Idaho she studied music. And at Whitman she studied theater and literature.

But for Robertson, the art world would eventually have to co-exist with the business world, like two colors double-loaded onto a painter's brush

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CFO, Norris, Beggs & Simpson

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Those were exciting times, Robertson says.

But in the mid-1980s, she followed her boyfriend, who is now her husband, to Portland. She got a job at Norris, Beggs & Simpson, and her husband, Kirk Robertson, joined the firm a short time later.

Her first position at Norris, Beggs & Simpson was as a property loans secretary, at a time when few women were working in the profession. That's changed, Robertson says, but the industry must continue making progress.

"There weren't a lot of women in the market when I started," Robertson said. "There's more diversity now, but not as much as I think would represent our community."

In a traditionally male-dominated field, there are still many barriers and many firsts: On the first of the year, Jan Robertson was named the first woman president of the Oregon chapter of the National Association of Office and Industrial Properties, a trade association for developers and real estate professionals. And despite not considering herself a feminist, she understands the historic significance of the position.

Her long-time boss isn't surprised by any of this.

When the real estate market collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Clayton Hering, a former Marine who'd been at Norris, Beggs & Simpson since 1972, became the president of the firm. He made Robertson a partner in 1993.

There are few people who can come into a field, fresh and unproven, and work within it like the veterans, Hering says. Robertson, however, was able to do so.

Still, her rise through the ranks, despite no college degree and little in the way of a traditional business education, surprised her.

"Like anything in life, it was luck, it was timing," Robertson said, adding she doesn't know if she would even get the job today.

But Robertson's professional rise happened because Hering saw her potential — a flash of intuition and the unique ability to balance intelligence with toughness. Robertson calls Hering both her friend and mentor.

"But I don't know who was mentoring whom," Hering said. When the savings and loan debacle threatened to demolish the commercial real estate industry toward the end of the 1980s, Robertson showed her leadership potential.

"She's been my wingman for years, through some of the toughest real estate times we have faced in our careers," Hering said. "During the 1980s and early 1990s, Jan did yeoman's work protecting company coffers. She was a very astute person at managing what were wooden nickels in those days."

### Second life in the arts

Robertson insists that her job, important as it is, does not define her.

"I am defined by my family and friends, and certainly my charitable passions are as important to me as my career is," she said.

An unyielding love of art continues to mold Robertson, in turn shaping others around her. The one-time aspiring theater arts major spends her free time serving on the board of Young Audiences, which provides arts education programs to children, and working with Arts Partners, a collaboration between school districts, arts organizations and local governments, to provide art opportunities to students whose programs have been cut or scaled back.

"This is important to me, to provide art for children in school who wouldn't get it," Robertson said.

Her dream of one day becoming an artist has passed, but she wants to keep the dream alive for others.

"You can have the right thing, but it won't work at that particular point in time," Robertson said.

Despite not working as a professional artist when she was younger, her passion for art is working for her today.

"I'd like to think that if I could have done anything I would have been an artist," Robertson said. "But now, it's sort of like how people who don't necessarily go into baseball can make tremendous coaches; I think it's the same thing (with art education)."