

SARA WALL BOLLINGER

Weighing in with know-how

Jason Klaiber

Having worked in the not-for-profit field for her entire professional career, Sara Wall Bollinger has come to appreciate the passion and selflessness intrinsic to the many organizations looking to fulfill social goods without financial gain.

With her business SWB Consulting Services, which takes its name from her initials, Bollinger has made it her mission to take that passion and purpose and have those nonprofits incorporate her recommendations for how to improve on the strategic front going forward — all while zeroing in on the places where the volunteers' individual skills and natural talents can shine best.

Vexing obstacles faced by these organizations often include division among a board of directors, dealing with unforeseen resignations and the resulting vacancies, bolstering a program or fundraiser that isn't gaining enough traction with the public, issues related to hiring or training, and an impasse with how to approach grant writing, she said.

"That's where there's a barrier at times," Bollinger explained. "People can just feel intimidated by the grant writing process, and by getting through it a couple times people then feel more confident and they're able to move forward."

Sometimes, Bollinger said, it can just be the need for outsider to bounce ideas off of who can provide some

Photo by Alice G. Patterson



- Sara Wall Bollinger officially got her business SWB Consulting Services going in 2015. The service is a certified New York State woman-owned business enterprise.
- Bollinger is also the deputy supervisor for the Manlius Town Board, an appointee to the town of Manlius and village of Fayetteville comprehensive plan steering committees, and a member of the Onondaga East Chamber.
- For her consulting service, which takes on not-for-profit agencies as its clientele, Bollinger draws from her own decades of experience as a leader for nonprofits.

helpful creative input, organizational tips, and enterprise-wide or inner-department planning suggestions to make a desired future a reality.

“You could expect most nonprofits to be facing the same kinds of challenges and experiencing the same kinds of opportunities,” she said. “By having worked in a number of different organizations as a staff member, as a director and also as a volunteer board member myself, I’ve seen how a lot of different organizations work and can assist my clients with things that they may anticipate coming forth because they’re pretty common in the not-for-profit arena. It’s about how people can strengthen themselves to be ready to do all of the wonderful things that they would like to do.”

Bollinger officially entered the consulting world in 2015, already equipped with decades worth of experience when it came to nonprofits.

By that point she had spent over 20 years — from 1991 to 2012 — as the executive director and CEO for Enable, an agency devoted to helping people with physical and developmental disabilities. That organization would coincidentally end up combining with Transitional Living Services of Onondaga County, a not-for-profit she had previously worked for that was based around residential supports and mental health recovery, to form AccessCNY in 2013.

At Enable, Bollinger got wise to the ins and outs of business development and how to accomplish growth as an organization, putting that knowledge to action as seen by the agency’s considerable expansion under her leadership.

“We got to experience some of those growing pains and also some of the challenges in the good way as far as taking advantage of opportunities as new funding, new geographic areas, and new program lines became available,” Bollinger said. “I figured out how you make the decisions about which programs to pick up and which ones maybe not to do, and how to integrate new programs into an existing organization.”

Bollinger was also the executive director for health planning with the advocacy organization pushing for quality and accessible healthcare HealthConnections and the president of the nonprofit seeking to improve the well-being of rural communities, the New York State Association for Rural Health. However, she makes clear that SWB Consulting Services ventures into all sectors of society and not just the traditional healthcare realm, allowing her to work with animal caretakers, veteran-empowering organizations, historic associations, and environmental groups too.

Now, with almost 10 years at the helm of SWB Consulting Services, Bollinger has gained even more experience by virtue of the day-to-day takeaways that come with pulling such a range of organizations out of their binds.

“Every single new organization, I have to learn something about, so it has certainly expanded my horizons and understanding of all the things that good not-for-profit organizations are doing in the Central New York area,” she said.

Based in Fayetteville, the village in which Bollinger lives, SWB Consulting provides assistance throughout Upstate New York as a designated New York State woman-owned business enterprise, stretching its services to the North Country, the Southern Tier and even Buffalo, though going so far west within the state is atypical for her, she said.

“I do feel because of the technology to permit virtual work that I have been successful in working with clients of a much bigger geographic area than would’ve been feasible if we only had in-person,”

Bollinger said. “When there’s a big meeting or a retreat or an analysis of some sort, I will travel to the client’s business.”

Though her business underwent only a slight “hiccup” during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic due to its established virtual structure and her self-employment, Bollinger spent the better part of the past three years showing certain nonprofits how to adjust, regroup and refocus on their biggest priorities through the potentially upending circumstances. As the nation has come out of the height of the pandemic, she’s started to see charitable businesses become eager to plan things out again and return to the goals they thought they were going to check off in 2020 but were forced to put off indefinitely.

Despite the similar brick walls that can arise, each client has its own unique needs. Her consulting process involves up-to-date fact-finding, background research and slideshow presentations containing useful advice as well as interactive brainstorming, surveys and listening sessions with the groups that enlist her help.

“People’s needs change across their lifespan,” Bollinger said. “There are generational changes and technological changes, but the more we can be in front of that and catch onto what is needed by the customers or by the residents in the case of the community, we can always be filling the needs that people identify.”

In tandem with the other roles she juggles as the town of Manlius’ deputy supervisor and as a member of the comprehensive plan steering committees for both the town and the village of Fayetteville, Bollinger’s overarching goals have been to make services to the community as effective as possible and remain responsive to what people are looking for in their surroundings. She added that those separate roles inform her consulting business because they foster an understanding of how to collaborate side by side with people who have disparate interests in the ultimate search for common ground.

SWB Consulting Services offers free consultations, letting Bollinger go over what an organization’s requests are before tailoring a proposal to their needs. At the end, she makes sure to supply each nonprofit with a written report that they can keep as a reference to go back to over time.

“Most not-for-profits’ boards of directors have terms of office, so the people who wrote a plan may have termed off by the time you’re into year three or four,” Bollinger said. “I think it’s valuable to have a written record with some pointers so that new board members coming on can understand what the thought process was that led to the plan they’re working on.”

Named a Woman of Distinction in 2022 at the 10th annual award ceremony held by Assemblyman Al Stirpe to recognize women based on the cumulative difference they’ve made and not just a single achievement, Bollinger also belongs to Women Business Opportunities Connection (WBOC), a Syracuse organization meant to fuel the success of local women entrepreneurs by nudging them to network with each other and possibly even do business with one another if they see fit.

She joined the supportive resource about 15 years ago and has developed an appreciation for the diversity of membership, the engaging monthly presenters, and the overall positivity it puts out there.

After a decade spent building up her business, Bollinger thanks the mentors who have helped her to carve her path in the world and the colleagues she has brought into the fold to lend a particular skill or perspective for her consulting endeavors, a good amount of whom belong to WBOC like she does.

“It’s important to know that none of us succeed alone,” she said. *SWM*
For more about SWB Consulting Services, visit swbconsultingservices.com.