

by Sharon Harris and Loren Adams

# Great Women of Gaming

Part two of a two-part special feature

*Almost everyone agrees: the gaming industry is still predominantly male. Yet one of the many striking things about the great women in our industry is that very few of them cite gender as a major issue. And all of them will gladly tell you that they see more and more women among the elite ranks in gaming. This trend is borne out by the numbers, and it is yet another place where the gaming industry outshines other national and worldwide industries.*

*Yet challenges remain. Some are inherent to gender. Others, according to all of our great women, are getting easier as more women join the ranks. The great women of gaming are architects, technology consultants, business leaders, regulators and attorneys, to name a few; yet, many of them also still perform the more "traditional" roles as mothers and volunteer community leaders. A few will say that to be successful they feel the need, among co-workers who are predominantly male, to work harder, be smarter, and shine brighter than the "guy" next to them. The task, and the often difficult choices, of balancing home and career still falls generally to the women.*

*Last month we got to know a few of the remarkable women who have met these and other challenges. They have brought value, talent and personality to their companies, their communities and to the entire business of gaming. In the second part of our feature, we meet a few more who have helped, and continue to help, make our industry what it is today.*





**Claudia Winkler,**  
*President,*  
**GHI Solutions, Inc.**

Life has taken Claudia Winkler a lot of places. Born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, Winkler lost her father at nine years old. "It was just me, my mom and my younger sister," she says. "My mother had to go back to work—and I had to grow up. I had a job from the time I was old enough to get a work permit."

One day when Winkler was in college at Penn State, she attended a guest lecture by a representative of the Governor's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. She found herself fascinated—so fascinated that she ended up accepting an internship and then working for the commission beginning in 1974.

Winkler is nothing if not multi-faceted; she had majored in psychology, was attracted to marketing, and had a keen mind for technology. The technology side prevailed. "I was the girl geek long before it was fashionable," Winkler says. In 1976, she accepted a position at PRC Realty Systems in Las Vegas, where she installed the first online computer system for the Las Vegas Board of Realtors. That led to a job with Unisys, in 1980, where Winkler worked on systems for banks. "Unisys (formerly Burroughs Corp.) had most of the banks in state of Nevada at that time," says Winkler. "That job taught me more background in some of the things that I do today. I

was selling and installing ATMs—when no one was ever going to use them, I might add. At that time the thought of not going in and giving the teller your paycheck was horrifying for most people. But those were the first kiosks...I was really working with the things that relate to currency handling and money processing in our business today."

In late 1981, Winkler married and moved to Lake Tahoe. It was the height of the first technology boom, and she ran a computer mail order company, with freelance assignments setting up call centers. Six years later, Winkler went to work for Harrah's. "I was hired to be the telemarketing manager for Harrah's Tahoe," she says. "After two weeks I went to my boss and told him I couldn't do the job. There was no data. There was no consolidated information on their customers. I wrote a report explaining what I saw as the issues. And in less than two weeks, Phil Satre, (at the time, Phil was Harrah's president of Northern Nevada) came by. We talked about the lack of data. Very shortly after that, all the marketing people had a meeting and we started to talk about database marketing. And that was the start of Harrah's patron database."

*"If I have an objective  
I am going to do  
whatever it takes to get  
there. That came from  
watching my mother  
as a small child."*

Winkler's position evolved as Harrah's became more corporately centralized. But the next few years would bring a flurry of opportunities and hops around the country. "I wanted more responsibility," says Winkler. "I wanted to be a director of marketing... and I felt like I needed to spread my wings." After a brief stint in Colorado in 1992, Winkler became director of marketing for a casino hotel in Reno. In 1994, she got a call from a headhunter and went to Mississippi to close and reopen a riverboat property. She was part of the management team that closed, moved and reopened the property within sixty days.

Next was Kansas City, where Winkler opened a property for Station Casinos; then it was on to Tunica, Peoria, New Orleans and back to Las Vegas with Boyd Gaming. "In 2001, I decided to make a move," she says. "I

wanted to get back to my technology roots. I joined a small technology company in Las Vegas called Tech Results. They are incredibly talented and I knew I could help them with their business and product development. Then we had 9/11. Technology took a hit. And I had the opportunity to go out on my own." In the summer of 2002, Winkler founded GHI Solutions, a technology consulting company—"an extra pair of hands in system selection and implementation," she says. Today, Winkler uses her deep product experience and relationships with all of the major system vendors to serve an extensive client list including Colony Resorts, Wynn Las Vegas, Pinnacle Entertainment and many Native American enterprises.

It hasn't always been easy for Winkler, and at first being a woman in gaming wasn't either. "Early in my career, being a woman was incredibly difficult," says Winkler. "There were very few women in executive positions, so there were very few role models. But as a founding member of GOLD (an organization for business women in gaming), I've seen tremendous progress with women in major leadership positions. Today, it's not uncommon to see women in C-Level roles with most of the major gaming companies. The strides that have been made in the past 15 years have been significant."

She has keen insight into her own success. "For those people that know me, they know that I am not easily intimidated," she says. "If I have an objective I am going to do whatever it takes to get there. That came from watching my mother as a small child. (She was) taking care of me and my sister, going to school, being the bread winner and doing what needed to be done. I remember my late father telling me that I could be anything I want to be when I grew up. Most importantly, I am blessed in a marriage with a husband who has always stood beside me and encouraged me to follow my dreams. Today I see more men taking a very active role in family and domestic responsibilities.

Still, the well-rounded, well-traveled Winkler looks back, and upon, great challenges—the loss of her father, the demands of a highly technical job, the prospect of aging parents. "That's life," she says. "You take whatever gets thrown at you. You can't look it as 'oh, woe is me'; you look at it as, where is the opportunity? There's always a solution. As my mother always says, 'and this too shall pass.' That's one of life's lessons that I've finally learned."