

PEOPLE

'He bought \$5m of bonds on my recommendation'

A 25-year-old once got the ultimate vote of confidence from an industry veteran. Now co-founder and executive chair of Varde Partners, **Marcia Page** tells **Andrew Hedlund** how she hopes other young women will get a similar boost

Varde was launched 25 years ago, when credit was hardly on any institutional investors' radar. Why then?

When George Hicks, Greg McMillan and I started Varde, one of the things that was unique at the time – but which made it a little harder to raise money from the get-go – was we brought both publicly-traded securities and private debt together.

We started investing in June 1994 in a fund vehicle that combined the public-to-private, liquid-to-illiquid spectrum. That was a particularly unique structure 25 years ago but was something we stuck with even though it probably slowed down our start and our fundraising.

What are the best ways to recruit and retain women in alternative assets?

Recruiting and retaining are both important. One without the other is what's got us into a glacial pace. There's been good numbers from a recruiting standpoint in some segments [of the financial services industry for female candidates] and when people are first coming into the industry.

What I have observed is the ability to retain women, particularly mid-career, and to hardwire organisations to eliminate unconscious bias to make sure women and other under-represented populations have a shot at the top has a long way to go.

Mentorship and sponsorship are important to professionals starting out. How do you differentiate between the two?

In the case of a mentor, you're basically seeking advice and support, and it's really the responsibility of the mentee to drive that relationship. In the case of a sponsorship, the sponsor is driving that exposure to senior leadership and advocating for high-profile projects for the sponsored employee.

Did someone serve that purpose for you?

When I was at Cargill, the person who was multiple levels above me – but the one that hired me – was Bob Lumpkins, who ultimately became vice-chairman at Cargill. He called me one Friday afternoon into his office and asked me if I knew what high-yield bonds were. I said, I thought I did, and then I spent the entire weekend learning about them. On Monday morning, he agreed with my analysis and went out and bought \$5 million worth of bonds on my 25-year-old recommendation.

Where does the focus for hiring, training and retaining a diverse and inclusive workforce in financial services go from here?

Special situation credit investing just started out as a cottage industry with a narrow range of investor types. Over the last two decades, the business has matured, become much more institutional – investors have become incredibly sophisticated.

If I tie both business strategy and my personal passion around how we think about our industry, we are at a very interesting point. The current focus on diversity and inclusion comes at a time when the industry is turning over and succession is an issue; it's just a real opportunity for firms to step into the talent gap.

How do you approach investing in the current atmosphere?

At a more strategic level, we are focusing on strategies and geographies where we are seeing the best opportunities and areas where we think we can deliver alpha. But they tend to be a little more industry or geographic oriented than a big theme out there. Asia is a very big focus for us, and we are seeing some particularly interesting business and partnership-building [opportunities] in India and Indonesia.