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SILICON VALLEY / SAN JOSE  
**BusinessJournal**

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**Women of distinction**

## Nonprofit, education, public policy

Winner: Belle Wei, dean, college of engineering, San Jose State University

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As dean of the college of engineering at [San Jose State University](#), Belle W.Y. Wei realizes that it's not enough to provide good engineering classes. She wants to make sure future generations learn how their industry fits into the emerging global marketplace.

Since being appointed dean in May 2002, part of her mission has been creating the Global Technology Initiative (GTI). Ms. Wei and David Tsang, managing member and co-founder of Acorn Campus Venture of Cupertino, an incubator and venture capital company funding high tech companies, created GTI, a \$1 million initiative in 2004. In 2004 and 2005 that program took roughly 50 of the university's best students on a two-week study tour of Asia. For some of the students that trip made them realize they would need advanced degrees to excel in the industry, Ms. Wei says.

Ms. Wei is also known for her community involvement outside the university, says Bob Lin, a managing member and co-founder of Acorn Campus. "She's a very good team builder," he says.

Mr. Lin is chairman of the [Monte Jade Science and Technology Association](#), of which Ms. Wei is a board member. A group of high-tech Chinese-American executives in Silicon Valley formed the group to promote cooperation and exchange of technology and investment between the Bay Area and Asia. When Mr. Lin took over as chair this year, he and Ms. Wei formed a proposal for a leadership and mentorship program to help the next generation of high tech entrepreneurs. They intend to enlist the help of Monte Jade members, who include many founders and high level executives in the valley's high tech companies, to hold regular workshops focused on skills like how to be a politician in an office, how to hold meetings and the like.

Mr. Lin envisions a few workshops a year helping people hone the skills they need for "not just the building of a company, but the building of a person," he says.

Reaching out to underrepresented groups is also important to Ms. Wei. She sits on the board of [Vision New America](#), founded in 1996 with the goal of helping underrepresented ethnic groups become more active in civic affairs. It provides internships for high school and college students of Asian, Hispanic and other backgrounds to work in local government offices and learn the democratic process.

Some of these students don't have the educational background to prepare them for the opportunities that lie ahead, Ms. Wei says.

"It's my mission to recruit them and to get them involved," she says.

This desire to serve her community existed long before she achieved the dean's position at SJSU, Mr. Lin says. And her contributions have not gone unnoticed. In 2003 she received a U.S. Congressional Commendation and in 2004 received a Special Congressional Recognition in Recognition of Outstanding and Invaluable Service to the Community.

In house at the university Ms. Wei is also making waves. The College of Engineering has increased its externally-funded grants and contract awards for faculty research by 133 percent on her watch.

"We give our faculty as much support as possible," Ms. Wei says, which includes the time and resources to pursue research grants.

"I have to provide the space for them to thrive," she says. "Good faculty is the core of a university."

**Honoree: Keri Procnier McLain, president & CEO, YWCA Silicon Valley**

Keri Procnier McLain has spent her life serving people facing all sorts of challenges, from mental health problems to physical and sexual assault.

The soft-spoken president and CEO of the [YWCA of Silicon Valley](#) started her career as a nun, went into special education and in 1978 became the first woman appointed in California to administer a state hospital center, [Agnews State Hospital Developmental Center](#) in San Jose.

She served there as chief executive officer for 15 years, 13 of them as a single mom living at the center. During that time she helped form state policies to protect vulnerable minors and adults from sexual abuse.

That's an issue that is painfully close to Ms. Procnier McLain, who was abused by her family priest when she was a child. After 15 years at Agnews she became associate director of all of California's state hospitals and developmental centers.

In 1978 she applied for a position heading up the YWCA of Silicon Valley, partly because of the good work they were doing helping people through the difficult healing after being sexually abused.

The YWCA had helped her four years earlier when she finally sought help for her own sexual abuse.

"Keri's steadfast dedication to the YWCA of Silicon Valley has been an inspiration for the board of directors," says Charlotte Chang, Deputy District Attorney for the Santa Clara County District Attorney's office and a YWCA board member.

Ms. Chang became familiar with the organization's work while she was prosecuting sex offenders. YWCA representatives were acting as advocates for some of the victims.

Ms. Chang describes Ms. Procnier McLain as charismatic and enthusiastic. "You can tell she deeply believes in what she does."

One of the most recent milestones for the YWCA and Procnier McLain was a vote at the national level to become gender neutral. The YWCA of Silicon Valley was one of the chapters that had been pushing for this for years and in 2005 voted six men onto its board despite the fact that it could have meant losing affiliation with the national group.

"We are an organization that not only works toward the empowerment of women, children and families, but an organization that works toward the elimination of racism, hatred and prejudice. It has strongly been our belief that exclusion of any one group is discrimination and that is not who we are," wrote Ms. Procnier McLain in an e-mail to her staff.

**Honoree: Rayona Sharpnack, CEO, [Institute for Women's Leadership](#)**

Rayona Sharpnack didn't have formal lessons or even a legitimate tennis outfit when she won Nevada's women's amateur tennis championships in both singles and doubles at the age of 15. She won because she had three older brothers to keep up with and a policy of never letting the ball bounce twice.

Thirty-nine years later as founder and chief executive officer of the Institute for Women's Leadership, she maintains that philosophy of creating your own context and she's still not dropping many balls. The former pro women's softball player has formed the for-profit Institute for Women's Leadership, where she gives seminars to the likes of Fortune 500 companies such as [Cisco Systems Inc.](#), [Charles Schwab Corp.](#) and [Visa International](#); governments such as the Australian government; and start-up businesses, nonprofits and individuals.

Through training and consulting she aims to help both women and men break through perceived barriers to help them reach or set goals in their professional and personal lives. "The vision of the company is that a sustainable world is only possible through the full partnership of men and women," Ms. Sharpnack says.

One of the biggest catalysts that propelled her to form the institute was serving four years on the women's athletic board during college fighting for Title IX. She played volleyball, basketball and softball but wasn't eligible for any scholarships like her brothers and got into enormous debt trying to pay for her education at the [University of Nevada](#) in Reno where she earned a bachelor's of science degree in physical education in 1973. After college Ms. Sharpnack played short stop, pitched and was general manager for the San Jose franchise of the International Women's Professional Softball League from 1976 to 1979.

At her institute she uses a multidiscipline approach including psychology, linguistics, physics and sociology.

"These programs help people reconnect to what really is important to them. In business it's my experience that that's kind of unusual," says Sandy Caldwell, who started taking seminars at the institute when she was manager of OEM marketing for Milpitas tech company [Adaptec Inc.](#) The classes helped her remotivate a demoralized team within the company.

After 18 years in the tech world, Ms. Caldwell also gained the confidence through Ms. Sharpnack and her seminars to pursue her long-time dream of opening a birth center staffed by doulas. She has incorporated the business and is now working on getting nonprofit status.

"She's impacted the lives of so many people, and through the people, she's impacted the companies," Ms. Caldwell says.

Honoree: Kim Walesh, assistant director, [Office of Economic Development](#), City of San Jose  
Kim Walesh believes in rebuilding cities from the ground up, using the ideas and participation of people who live and work there rather than relying solely on leaders.

The name of the Mountain View firm she helped found, Collaborative Economics, sums up her approach.

"I've always been interested in the area where business, government and community come together," she says.

Collaborative Economics is a consulting firm helping representatives from business, foundations, government, schools and the community shape their cities.

She's a veteran in that department, having helped with more than 20 state and regional competitiveness projects in North America, Asia and Europe in her role as senior policy analyst for [SRI International](#), an independent nonprofit research institute in Menlo Park where she worked before founding Collaborative Economics.

Three years ago Walesh took a leave of absence from Collaborative to accept a position as assistant director, economic and cultural development, for the City of San Jose.

In that position she led the creation of San Jose's first economic strategy, which provides the

guidelines for policies, investments and partnerships for the city from 2004 to 2008.

"I think she's one of the catalysts for change in the city, period," says Dan Fenton, president and chief executive officer of the [San Jose Convention and Visitors Bureau](#).

"She's not caught up in the bureaucracy. You would never go to a meeting with Kim Walesh where she would tell you all the bureaucratic reasons why [something] is not going to happen," Mr. Fenton says.

He likes Ms. Walesh's progressive ideas for improving the city. Among those are plans for a "creative urban center," where the center of San Jose would be combined with the cultural center.

One example of the new ideas Ms. Walesh is helping to bring to San Jose is Zero One San Jose: A Global Festival of Art on the Edge & the Thirteenth International Symposium of Electronic Art, to be held from Aug. 7-13 downtown.

The intent is to make San Jose known as the intersection of art and technology the way Park City, Utah, is known for the Sundance Film Festival, Ms. Walesh says.

Mr. Fenton says Ms. Walesh has been a key player in getting that festival off the ground and he's pleased with her work in improving the city's economic health.

"My hope is that she gets more and more responsibility," he says.

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