



Photos by Kate Philbrick

Susanna Liller: Going into the Fire

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Michaela Cavallaro

As a management consultant, Susanna Liller knew her strength was bringing people together. But she was startled by how frequently her consulting clients—typically groups of executives—dealt with internal conflict. “I was afraid of conflict myself,” Liller says. “So I needed to go into the fire.”

As a result, Liller pursued mediation training through venues ranging from the University of Southern Maine to Harvard. What she had once feared became her passion—to the extent that she began working solely with groups in conflict. Formerly a manager at Bath Iron Works, Liller helped mediate a contract negotiation between BIW management and union workers—with results

so positive that then-President Bill Clinton appeared in person to congratulate the parties on their success. She worked with postal service employees, as well as the team tasked with appeasing local residents as T.F. Greene Airport in Providence planned a runway extension.

It was after the runway project—“500 very unhappy people in a room,” she recalls—that Liller decided she’d learned as much about conflict as she cared to know. And so she reinvented her career yet again, this time focusing on what she calls “personal strategic planning.” “Just as companies go on retreat to be proactive about determining what’s important to them and how they should

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go about achieving it, individuals should do the same," she says.

And while strategic planning retreats often produce valuable insights and exciting ideas, they can be tough to put into action once the retreat has ended. Liller determined that she could perform a valuable role as the "heavy stick" who would keep participants accountable after they returned to their real lives. Thus was born Ruby Slippers LLC, a retreat program—with structured follow-ups in place—to help women figure out what they want to do with their lives and then develop a plan to achieve it.



Liller launched the business while working at Barton & Gingold, a Portland communications firm.

She eventually left the firm to focus full-time on Ruby Slippers and Liller Consulting, an executive coaching and consulting firm that grew out of her background in mediation,

strategic planning and facilitation. With Ruby

Slippers, Liller focuses on the

following idea: "You have inside of you what you need; you don't need to go to some wizard or guru to figure it out," she says. "Dorothy actually had the ruby slippers on the whole time—she just didn't understand what they could do."

Liller finds that women particularly benefit from undergoing this process in a group. "They want to do this thing or that thing, but they're scared," she explains. "In a retreat format, they can take courage from other women's example."

For several years, Liller has run Ruby Slippers with two partners, Amy Wood, a psychologist, and Creighton Taylor, a

life coach. Lately, however, the women's professional goals haven't fit easily under the Ruby Slippers tent. As a result, they're envisioning the new businesses they might create, both individually and in partnership.

Making yet another leap in her professional life doesn't faze Liller—it's something she not only advocates for her clients, but practices herself as well. In her mid-30s, Liller left an unsuccessful marriage, taking nothing but her young son and daughter. She tackled single motherhood with grace, buttressed by a strong faith that she was making the right move. "In a place of transition, you're out of your comfort zone," she says. "But that's where growth takes place. And every time you do it, it gets easier."

Liller may come by this comfort with change genetically: At age 20, her Hungarian grandmother and namesake left Budapest for Amsterdam, determined to get to America on her own. After her train was underway, young Susanna realized it was headed east to Russia, rather than west to Amsterdam. All alone, with no other resources at hand, she threw her suitcase off the train and jumped.

Two generations later, her American granddaughter shows other women how to make leaps of their own—and land firmly on their own two feet.

Where will you leap? Tell us.

