




# No Restrictions, No Barriers

*Editor's Note: On March 12, 2015 in Alexandria, Va., Suzanne DiGeronimo, FAIA, F.SAME, was presented with the Academy of Fellows Golden Eagle Award for outstanding contributions to the A/E/C profession. She is the first woman, and first architect, to receive the Golden Eagle Award. An SAME member since 1983 and a Fellow since 1991, DiGeronimo has been a pioneer in an historically male-oriented profession. She was the only woman in her class while attending Columbia University School of Architecture and went on to accept a position at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, where she, again, was the only woman. Years later, she was the only woman on the 12-member Working Committee that helped establish the Academy of Fellows, then served as Chair of the inaugural Fellows Investiture in 1995. An active member of the New Jersey, New York City and Washington DC Posts, DiGeronimo is President of DiGeronimo Architects, a certified Women-Owned Business Enterprise, headquartered in Paramus, N.J., that she founded in 1970 with her husband Louis. The following speech was given at the 2015 Golden Eagle Awards Dinner.*

Thank you. Wow! The Golden Eagle Award. Thank you all for being here.

You know my dad was a tin can sailor in World War II, bobbing along 21 continuous months in the Pacific. He saw the American flag raised high up Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. Thank you all of you veterans out there. You've accomplished an incredibly fine job for our country—for keeping us all free.

And my mom? She was a real Rosie the Riveter working in the factory on the home front. Our American production of warfighting goods in World War II was the envy of the world—and she won war for the Allies. I thank all of you civilians out there working in public service. You are all truly awesome!



But then again, neither did mine. The dean threw me out of architectural school. Married women with children shouldn't be architects.

*I didn't know I shouldn't or that I couldn't.*

Out in the work world, my supervisor forbid me from entering the construction site; prostitutes serviced the crews there. I joined a professional society and the holiday meeting entertainment was a stripper. To attend a business meeting at the private University Club in Manhattan, I had to go through the kitchen and up the service elevator. No women allowed. There were no women in military combat, no women in military leadership.

All that was about to change as it does in this great country of ours not with the clash of the sword, but with the stroke of a pen. President Gerald Ford signed a bill that included a mandate that all the military academies were to admit women. The first graduating classes of hearty female midshipmen and cadets happened in 1980.

No surprise then that in 1981 I received my first prime contract with the military—U.S. Coast Guard, Third Coast Guard District, Governor's Island. The Coast Guard District Engineer suggested I join SAME and so I did.

I met New Jersey Post President Brig. Gen. Patrick J. McCarthy, New Jersey National Guard—a leprechaun of an American Irishman, a workaholic of an advocate of the Society. I met his wife Marie. Now Marie raised five kids all through Pat's long military career and his extended absences. Need I say more about her spirit?

And so I progressed and became New Jersey Post President. The Corps assigned a new New York District Engineer. That military position automatically received the SAME position, head of North Atlantic Region. I invited the general to speak at my small New Jersey Post member meeting, held at the tiny enlisted club, at the obscure Military Ocean Terminal Bayonne, MOTBY—a place where only military luggage ever went. He came! Brig. Gen. Gerald C. "Jed" Brown.

Jean Jennings Brown, Jed's wife, is here today. She flew in from Abu Dhabi just to be here tonight. Thank you for coming Jean. Your presence here means so very much to

me. Jed adopted me; he encouraged me to do all I could for the Post, the region, for the nation. No restrictions, no barriers.

*I didn't know I shouldn't or that I couldn't.*

So, what was it that made SAME as a professional organization so very attractive for me? It was the active participation of both military and civilians certainly—but also the welcome mat that SAME extends to family. For my own personal intellectual stimulation, the Society has always had the most mind-boggling technical sessions, sessions like no other engineering society has. Hands down, no competition! Tour Cheyenne Mountain, tag along on a re-fueling bomber, learn techniques to secure and lock down core critical facilities.

And programs that invite others' interest. New York Harbor inspection tours by Army vessel. Lectures on history at West Point. Summer picnics at Picatinny. With SAME, it is work and recreation; it is men and women, leaders and doers, husbands and wives, all ranks, all working together, appreciating each other's differences and celebrating each of our individual contributions. By this combination, our Society is the envy of the world.

And so my volunteer career with the Society has lasted 34 years! I've worked elbow to elbow with Rear Admiral Navy, Vice Admiral Coast Guard, Brigadier General Army, Major General Air Force, Lieutenant General Army. And amongst all these giants, these heroes...

Me. A little Polish Lithuanian girl born to the farms and coal mines of northeastern Pennsylvania.

So for Pat and Jed, for our Society's rich legacy of leadership...

For the Fellows newly invested today...

For future SAME Fellows...maybe even my own grandkids...

I am proud to accept this, the Society of American Military Engineers, Academy of Fellows, Golden Eagle Award.

All my life I've been told *I shouldn't and that I couldn't*.

Well, I did. And you know what? I'm not done yet!

And that my friends is what being an SAME Fellow is all about.

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For more Reflections from SAME members, visit [www.youtube.com/user/samewebmanager](http://www.youtube.com/user/samewebmanager).

And me? Well, I came along and upset the apple cart.

In my generation, girls were the fragile sex. Girls' sports were half-games, half-court sorts of affairs. It was boys only for wood shop and drafting. Girls only for cooking and sewing. And an architectural profession? Don't even think about it, said my college professor; it's too tough for a girl.

*I didn't know I shouldn't or that I couldn't.*

So I attended architectural school at night. I met my husband, my partner, my soul mate: Louis DiGeronimo. He's here today. We married and spread out a calendar to plan our family. We joke that our son Marcello ought to have received credit for two semesters of an architectural education—nine months. Marcello's here today. He's a licensed architect working for Turner, just back from Qatar. And no, his professors at Syracuse didn't give him the credit.