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SC Women in Leadership Honors South Carolina Women Who Have Blazed Trails in Civic Leadership at Annual Leading Women Dinner

September 26, 2023 (Columbia, South Carolina) – SC Women in Leadership (SC WIL) honors SC Ports president and CEO, [Barbara Melvin](#); the only five female [South Carolina State “Sister” Senators](#), Penry Gustafson, Margie Bright Matthews, Mia McLeod, Sandy Senn, and Katrina Shealy; and [South Carolina State Representative Heather Bauer](#), at their annual [Leading Women Dinner](#) on September 26, 2023 from 6-8:30 p.m. at 701 Whaley Street in Columbia. The event includes a reception at 6 p.m., followed by a seated dinner and awards ceremony beginning at 7 p.m. Guests at the sold-out event will include some 300 current and former female candidates, elected and appointed officials, and supporters of equal representation in civic leadership. SC WIL is a statewide multi-partisan organization working to inform, inspire, and involve qualified women in elected and appointed leadership.

The Leading Women Dinner recognizes and celebrates South Carolina women who have stepped forward to seek elective (win or lose) and appointive office, honors women who have blazed trails in civic leadership so that others may follow, and builds a support network to encourage women to vie for civic leadership roles. The Leading Woman, Leadership Legacy, and Rising Star awards honor women in local, statewide, and appointive offices that have devoted themselves to community service, demonstrated a commitment to working across party lines, and whose civic work has improved the quality of life for all South Carolinians.

SC WIL Leading Woman honoree, Barbara Melvin, is the first woman to lead a top 10 U.S. operating container port. As CEO, Melvin leads a team of more than 1,000 people who keep freight moving at the Port of Charleston and rail-served Inland Ports Greer and Dillon, supporting more than 225,000 jobs throughout South Carolina. During her more than 20-year tenure, Melvin has held several senior leadership positions with SC Ports. Her leadership style exemplifies the principles of cooperation and collaboration that SC WIL promotes to bring economic prosperity to South Carolina for generations to come. In addition to overseeing numerous infrastructure projects, Melvin led the Charleston Harbor Deepening Project, resulting in the deepest harbor on the East Coast at 52 feet.

“Barbara Melvin is navigating uncharted waters as the first woman to lead an operating port of this size,” said Barbara Rackes, CEO and president of the SC WIL board of directors. Rackes continued, “She has proved herself a capable captain, working collaboratively with state elected leaders, members of Congress, state and federal agencies, project partners, business and maritime community leaders, and SC Ports officials through the historic and monumental harbor deepening project of the eighth largest U.S. container port. We celebrate her achievements as a model our future women leaders can emulate.”

“The collaboration and partnership I have seen in the maritime and logistics industry illustrate that we can achieve great things when working together,” says Melvin. “I am honored to be recognized by SC Women in Leadership as a leader whose civic work has strengthened the supply chain to bring economic prosperity and improved quality of life for all South Carolinians,” she continues. “It is hard to be what you cannot see, and seeing women break barriers enables future generations of girls to envision themselves as leaders.”

S.C. “Sister” Senators Gustafson (R-Kershaw), Matthews (D-Colleton), McLeod (I-Richland/Fairfield), Senn (R-Charleston/Dorchester), and Shealy (R-Lexington), dubbed the “Sister Senators,” recently announced as winners of the prestigious [John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award](#) for their politically courageous leadership, come from different political positions, but have united to demand women’s views be heard and protect their freedom as equal citizens. SC WIL recognizes them as Leadership Legacy honorees for their example that cooperation and respectful conversations, rather than political partisanship, can make our state a better place to live and work for all citizens.

“The Sister Senators are showing us that our legislators can disagree on some issues and still respect each other, said Barbara Rackes, CEO and president of the SC WIL board of directors, “that we can find common ground and work across party lines to achieve progress for the people of South Carolina.”

“Women are 51% of the population in South Carolina, but our male dominated state legislature is enacting laws that treat women like second-class citizens. Women must turn out to vote in party primaries that most voters skip and cross party lines in primary and general elections to support pro-women candidates,” employs Sen. Katrina Shealy. “We [Sister Senators] are honored to be recognized for our Leadership Legacy, speaking up for the women of South Carolina demanding that our rights as full citizens are protected.”

The SC WIL Rising Star Award recognizes a young woman who reflects the positivity, commitment, and resilience required to bring people together in a world that threatens to pull us apart. This year’s honoree, S.C. State Representative Heather Bauer, has exhibited a commitment to involvement in civic, charitable, and political organizations and served as an example to support the advancement of women in leadership. Representative Bauer ran for office three times, working with minimal financial resources when her opponents were backed by larger interest groups. Since taking office, she has asked more of her legislative colleagues than they may have expected of themselves, inviting everyone to do better for our state. She sees clearly what needs to be done and speaks up when others are unwilling. As a freshman legislator, Representative Bauer’s focus on government accountability had a direct impact on the 2023 legislative session and South Carolina residents. She secured more than \$1.6 million to fund new projects in her district and passed multiple bi-partisan bills.

Due to institutional, socio-economic, and cultural barriers that persist in South Carolina, running for elected office is daunting for female candidates. Only 14.7% of seats in the state legislature are held by women and women are similarly underrepresented in local elected office and on public appointed boards and commissions. South Carolina voters have never sent a woman to represent them in the U.S. Senate. Additionally, since 1993, there had been no women at all representing South Carolina in the U.S. Congress until Nancy Mace (R-Charleston) was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2020. No woman of color from South Carolina has ever served in the U.S. Congress.

To address this inequality, SC WIL has undertaken [More in 2024](#), an ambitious year-long push to recruit women from across the state to run for elected office in the 2024 election cycle and apply to serve on public boards and commissions. SC WIL's More in 2024 recruitment effort calls for citizens across the state to ask women they know to consider seeking elected and appointed office and [refer](#) them to SC WIL for training, resources, and information to help them overcome barriers to leadership. SC WIL's goal is to triple the number of women filing to run and seeking appointment at all levels of government. The recruitment effort aims to infuse more than 800 more women into the pipeline to public leadership in South Carolina. This follows a decline in the total number of women in the S.C. Legislature after the 2022 election, reversing a decade-long trend of increases.

The Leading Women Dinner, previously hosted by the Southeastern Institute for Women in Politics, includes a reception presented by South Carolina Ports, open beer and wine bar, seated dinner, and awards. Proceeds from the event support SC WIL's mission of recruiting and training women to run for elective and appointive office in South Carolina.

[View](#) full bios of all the honorees.

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About SC Women in Leadership

SC Women in Leadership (SC WIL) is a statewide multi-partisan group of women working together across differences to move South Carolina forward by informing, inspiring, and involving women in leadership. SC WIL's work sharing information about, making connections to, and encouraging women's engagement in local and state civic leadership is moving South Carolina forward socially, economically, educationally, and environmentally. SC WIL believes that as talented women with diverse and inclusive backgrounds step up to lead and to govern, gender and racial equality, as well as community equity, can at last become a reality. SC WIL's vision is for women to be represented at every level of leadership including elected officials, appointed government boards and commissions, and as active volunteers and advocates in the community. Visit scwomenlead.net to learn more about how SC WIL is working to fill the pipeline with women, increase fair voting, and reduce polarization.

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