Entrepreneurs Susan Carstensen, Yasmine Elbaggari and Sheryl Winarick have lunch together on Wednesday at Wild Crumb.

As the tech industry grows in Montana, are women growing with it?

By ABBY LYNES • Chronicle Staff Writer

A longtime veteran of Bozeman’s tech world, Susan Carstensen, said the business climate for women in Montana doesn’t look like it did when she first started.

“The difference between 1995 and today, I think, is pretty dramatic,” she said. Carstensen worked for RightNow Technologies, now Oracle, as a chief operating officer, chief financial officer and senior vice president of customer experience. She serves on numerous organizations’ boards and now does consulting for up-and-coming tech companies at Yellowstone Growth Partners, and she said she and others have worked hard to bring more women to the table.

As the tech sector grows rapidly, women are making gains in Montana. On Monday, women-led, Bozeman-based home delivery website MyVillage announced it raised just shy of $6 million in seed capital funding, the largest seed round in state history.

There are more value investors than ever, said Scott White, Prospera Women’s Business Network director. There are organizations throughout the state dedicated to advancing women in the workplace, and she said that entrepreneurs do well in general because there are fewer biases in the state, she said.

Still, as women make gains, leaders say there is work to be done. In 2018, Montana’s Women’s Business Alliance. (MHTBA) executive director Christina Henderson said 18 percent of Alliance member companies had women leaders. The last time she did an analysis in 2015, that number was still 18 percent.

Part of the problem is representation, Henderson said. “I think part of the challenge is the lower percent of executive leaders, she said. “Women can feel outnumbered or feel like they’re the only woman in the room.”

Carstensen said she often felt outnumbered in her earlier days in tech. She was often the only woman at the executive table, she said. “When you’re the only one, it’s hard to bring offers with you,” she said.

It was hard enough to move forward by yourself, she said. She had a good experience working in tech in Montana, and she said she succeeded by focusing on business and moving forward.

She thinks things are different now, though. She sees more women bringing other women forward and speaking up. She spoke up more. When boards she serves on look at candidates for jobs, she asks if members are evaluating all candidates fairly, as most women have unconscious biases. She brings up people who were passed over for promotions and encourages companies to evaluate equal pay.

While she’s faced some challenges, she said she thinks there’s less of a “bro” culture in Montana than more tech-saturated, populated places. On a few of the boards she serves on, more than half of the members are women.

In a less populated state can also make it easier to network, as Montana is so connected, she said. “Women helping women helps, she said.” Places like Seattle, not everybody knows everybody.

It’s important for more women to be in leadership positions, Carstensen said, as multiple studies have shown diversity is good in the workplace. Henderson pointed out that in MHTBA’s list of high-growth companies to watch and top tech employers of 2018, around 30 percent of the pool of 60 companies had a woman co-founder or top leader. So tech firms that MHTBA has identified as top-performing are more likely to have a female executive at the top, she said.

Above all, it’s important for women to be visible, Carstensen said. “I feel like I have a responsibility to be seen so others feel more inspired,” she said.

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