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Employee Benefit Adviser

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MOST INFLUENTIAL WOMEN IN BENEFIT ADVISING

Charlotte Santa Cruz
is just one of 30
transformational
leaders



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One of *EBA's* 2017
Most Influential
Women in Advising,
Charlotte Santa
Cruz brings
exceptional service
to the benefits
enrollment process
and beyond

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FROM THE EDITOR



Leading ladies

ELIZABETH GALENTINE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

If you haven't already, now is the time to bookmark employeebenefitadviser.com and make a habit of visiting the website on a daily basis. This month and next, we're featuring the stories of *EBA's* remarkable 2017 honorees in the fourth annual installment of our Most Influential Women in Benefit Advising awards.

For the first time this year, we had to expand the group of winners to 30, due to such an incredible pool of applicants. Selected through a month-long online nomination process that asked for nominee achievements in advising as well as experience in lifting up other women in the profession, this year's group has an exemplary track record of improving the field of benefit advising for all who are fortunate enough to work in it.

The cover story, "Storming back" (p. 18), on adviser Charlotte Santa Cruz, and the accompanying descriptions of the other 29 winners on the following pages, provide a glimpse of the outstanding accomplishments of these industry leaders.

Santa Cruz's story in particular is a remarkable one about overcoming unspeakable personal adversity while still maintaining 100% commitment to her clients, above and beyond the industry standard. Unlike your typical benefit enrollment specialist, Santa Cruz exceeds all measures of client service expectations.

As her nominator for the Most Influential Women award, Jeff Owens — a former competitor — points out, "She's not driven by the dollar and production," but rather the needs of individual employees.

Other exemplary winners, who each are being profiled more deeply on our website, employeebenefitadviser.com, include:

- Susan Donohue, whose approach to helping save more than \$1 million on a pharmacy contract that exposed excessive pricing has been leveraged for other client relationships at her brokerage, NFP. She also helps new recruits balance and develop valuable career paths, and created a client event series that includes a wine tasting and a night at the Boston Pops.

- Brokerage Pacific Resources' Heather Gillow was instrumental in advising clients to discontinue medical claim payments for employees who were out on long-term disability, which saved millions of dollars. She currently manages \$275 million in premiums and maintains 100% client retention.

- At least two clients of Cerina Jensen of CoreMark Insurance Services survived regulatory audits because of her hands-on support. Under her leadership, the Sacramento Association of Health Underwriters broke a number of records and earned the Pacesetter Award.

Learn from these leaders' examples in their featured profiles online, as well as those of the other 26 winners.

STORMING BACK

Charlotte Santa Cruz survived Hurricane Katrina and a life-threatening accident and now thrives as one of *EBA's* Most Influential Women in Benefit Advising.

BY BRUCE SHUTAN

She's an adviser who also happens to run the only woman-owned national benefits enrollment firm in the U.S., and has helped working mothers re-enter the workforce after years of caregiving. Now, she can add another accolade.

Charlotte Santa Cruz, founder and CEO of the Santa Cruz Insurance Group LLC in Bay St. Louis, Miss., about an hour's drive outside New Orleans, is one of 30 leaders chosen as *EBA's* 2017 Most Influential Women in Benefit Advising.

Selected by the editorial staff from dozens of applicants over a month-long online nomination process, Santa Cruz specializes in the voluntary employee benefit space and is known for her relentless commitment to customers and former customers alike.

EBA's annual list, in its fourth year, recognizes extraordinary contributions such as significantly increasing a firm's sales or market share, providing strategic consulting, fostering benefit innovations and elevating the status of all women in the profession.

Santa Cruz and her 35 employees cover a spectrum of plans involving health, den-

tal, vision, life and disability as well as various other voluntary benefits for more than 150 companies.

Her firm is known for providing extensive HR, billing and claims support on the back end, where most firms rely on carriers to provide this post-enrollment service because it's not cost effective to do that additional work. Knowing that contacting the carrier for service rarely solves a client's service issues, Santa Cruz provides this unique service at no cost to clients other than compensation received from products sold.

Santa Cruz Insurance Group's enrollment counselors are paid according to persistency of business, which Santa Cruz says is directly tied to an employee making good buying decisions when purchasing benefits and not being oversold.

Once an aspiring investigative journalist, Santa Cruz's entrance into the employee benefit field began with an exposure to medical conferences while in a marketing role for the New Orleans Convention Center. In 1994, she founded Advanced Business Systems, which handled electronic billing for health insurance claims and under-

went an official name change to Santa Cruz Insurance Group LLC in 2002 after adding insurance products to her portfolio.

Leading up to Hurricane Katrina, she was managing enrollment services for 500 to 1,000 employees. Since then, despite losing her home and business in the storm and scrambling to work from temporary locations, she has managed, enrolled or advised 54,000 additional employees in their benefit decisions with the help of her team.

In addition, production went from mid-six figures to roughly \$3 million in annual new sales about three to four years after a crippling accident that nearly claimed her life in April 2006. This production surge doubled revenues as well, climbing steadily every year since about 2008 and making Santa Cruz one of the nation's top producing enrollment firms over the past decade.

But it wasn't easy. After Katrina and the accident, Santa Cruz's revenues dropped significantly with an inability to bring in new clients, while the storm put many existing customers out of business. "Adversity is an excellent coach and game changer," says Santa Cruz, who never told clients about

► Charlotte Santa Cruz maintains client relationships long after her enrollment services have ended.



Katrina or an accident she had soon after.

Perseverance

When Hurricane Katrina pounded the Gulf of Mexico in 2005, it completely destroyed Santa Cruz's entire town and claimed the life of her 72-year-old father-in-law.

But Santa Cruz and her immediate family escaped the devastation by traveling to Destin, Fla., for a client meeting. "Otherwise, we may not have survived it," she says.

For six months following Katrina, Santa Cruz dropped her three kids off at school in Fairhope, Ala., where the family had temporarily resettled, and drove just under three hours to Bay St. Louis to what was left of her office, while also maintaining a business presence in New Orleans.

Then, in spring 2006, she stopped by her home, which was being renovated, and noticed five huge bathroom vanity mirrors that workers had left propped against the inside of her garage door. She tried moving them without assistance, but in the process a mirror slipped from her grasp and sliced

nerves, ligaments, muscles, tendons and blood vessels in a wrist and foot.

Cellphones still didn't work at that point, but two neighbors who happened to be intensive care unit nurses found her and managed to get her to the hospital. Told she might have to have her foot amputated, an orthopedic surgeon advised her to walk daily to increase blood flow. The color finally returned.

Still, the uphill battle to recover was steep. Santa Cruz worked from bed, doing everything herself until September 2007, when she met Christina LaFontaine, a young mom who's now director of operations at her company. With LaFontaine handling the office, Santa Cruz could finally focus on sales.

By 2013, Santa Cruz was doing so well that she began working with a competitor to help handle the workload. Jeff Owens, who, until recently, served as territory enrollment manager for Allstate Benefits, became a collaborator and nominated his now close friend for *EBA's* annual award.

What makes Santa Cruz so influential is also what makes her unique, according to Owens. Case in point: She works with her clientele long after most enrollment companies move on, forcing competitors to raise their game in terms of service and attitude. "She's not driven by the dollar and production," he says.

Vickie Conaway, HR director for the City of Pine Bluff, Ark., who has worked with Santa Cruz as a client for five years, describes her as "a very strong, matter-of-fact type of businesswoman." A passion for clients and community "are the foundation for her business," Conaway adds.

Honesty and integrity

Santa Cruz is now in excellent health. Her selfless qualities have helped many female victims of the storm, including her own mother, land well-paying jobs with her firm and renew their sense of self-worth.

Her dedication extends to business partnerships as well. Santa Cruz is careful about the vendors with whom she's aligned. "If a carrier has a history of not paying claims or giving my clients a rough time, they won't stay on my portfolio for long," she says. It's also important to stick around after the sale and not let customer service slide, according to her business philosophy.

Otherwise, she says it's akin to abandoning a child. She's even dedicated to former clients, one of whom she helped recover more than \$180,000 that was erroneously paid to a former benefit carrier. "Employers are not only appreciative of such honesty and integrity, but baffled that anyone would walk away from a potential revenue source simply because she puts the client's needs before her own," Owens says.

It hasn't been easy being a woman-owned business in a male-dominated field, according to Owens, who has seen firsthand women having to work harder to create "extraordinary strategies for error-free implementations in an industry that seems to be more accepting of, and forgiving toward, men. Charlotte stands out as the most striking example of someone who has built an industry flagship while navigating against this tide."

Santa Cruz isn't someone who crumbled from tragedy or wore her struggles as a badge of honor that she worked into every conversation, Owens explains. Rather, he says she let the misery shape her character without defining the rest of her life.

While unsure what to expect in the future, she's enjoying a comfort zone that was expected 12 years ago. "I simply take everything day by day and evaluate the opportunities that come our way," she says. "And come they have!"