

PWB: Building Leaders – and Confidence

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PWB member Xiaobei Sullivan (right) poses with New Hampshire Gov. Maggie Hassan.

Everyone knows how scary it can be to jump into something new. As an immigrant, a non-native English speaker, and a woman in a traditionally male-dominated industry, Xiaobei Sullivan has faced her fears head on to become a leader in the building industry.

Fifteen years ago, at the age of 26, Xiaobei moved to the United States from China to attend school in Boston. Her sister was already living there and worked for a well-respected building and remodeling company, The Sullivan Company, headed by Paul Sullivan.

Today, Xiaobei and Paul are married, and she is vice president.

Xiaobei began tagging along with Paul to meetings and events for the [Builders and Remodelers Association of Greater Boston](#) (BRAGB) and at NAHB meetings: Paul has served as president of BRAGB and as [NAHB Remodelers](#) chair, and is the current president of the [New Hampshire HBA](#).

“I never said anything, because I thought, ‘I can’t speak English, and I don’t want people to not understand me,’” said Xiaobei. “For American people, you don’t even think about it. But for me, it was another hurdle to overcome.”

Xiaobei started to make friends during these NAHB events and meetings and was encouraged to join [Professional Women in Building](#) (PWB), but she hesitated due to her continued fears of not being understood.

“One of the women from PWB said to me, ‘Xiaobei, don’t worry about it. We understand if you don’t speak perfect English. Nobody will laugh at you. Nobody will look down at you because of that.’ It seems like a small thing, but for me, and I think for a lot of foreign people, it was actually a really big deal.”

Since becoming involved with PWB, Xiaobei has taken on many leadership roles, including serving as chair of PWB’s Legislative Committee and board trustee for areas 1 and 2.

“That one quick conversation was actually a really big release for me, and I always remember that story,” said Xiaobei. “I think if I had never overcome that, I would have never run a meeting or hosted a

conference call. I would be too scared.”

Now, Xiaobei is thriving as a PWB leader, and she plans to make her first visit to Capitol Hill during the [NAHB Legislative Conference](#) June 14 as chair of the Legislative Committee.

“I’m very interested in American politics, and since I’m foreign, it’s all new for me,” said Xiaobei. “I want to do more and more.”

To add to her list of accomplishments, Xiaobei recently earned her [Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist](#) (CAPS) designation and is working on completing additional designations.

Xiaobei will continue to use her position in PWB to celebrate and promote women’s important role in the building industry. As the trustee for the New England area, she is also working on starting a new PWB chapter in Boston.

“Even though the industry can appear to be male dominated, I feel it’s very important to show women’s power in the industry,” said Xiaobei.

Xiaobei encourages everyone, but especially women, not to shy away from getting involved with professional organizations like NAHB and PWB, a council that prides itself for developing leadership paths for women in the residential construction industry and serving as a conduit to engage and promote women in these roles.

“I think for women who aren’t yet involved, just start by listening,” said Xiaobei. “Just go to the meeting or an event and just listen. If I can do it, everybody can do it. I feel very proud to belong to something. I tell all my friends that I’m a member of the National Association of Home Builders. I feel very proud.”

To learn more about PWB opportunities or to find out how to launch a local council, contact executive director [Sheronda Carr](#).