



Marsha Serlin was a mother of two facing foreclosure when she began her scrap-metal business. Photo: Erik Unger

From this week's Business of Life

ADL honoree shows her can-do spirit

By: [Mary Cameron Frey](#) March 09, 2009

The Anti-Defamation League, founded in 1913, combats anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry. It provides education programs, including training law enforcement in how to recognize and confront hate crimes. For the past 16 years, it has recognized women business leaders at an annual fundraising event. Honored this year are a quartet of overachievers: Susan Lichtenstein, chief legal officer of Baxter International Inc.; Cheryl Mayberry McKissack, founder, president and CEO of Nia Enterprises LLC; fashion designer Maria Pinto, and Marsha Serlin, founder and CEO of United Scrap Metal Inc. Crain's spoke with Ms. Serlin, whose company is one of the country's leading recyclers, with 200 employees and annual revenue of more than \$80 million. She also serves on the boards of After School Matters, United Way and Children at the Crossroads Foundation.

CRAIN'S: Would you say your driven, entrepreneurial spirit was born of necessity?

MS. SERLIN: Absolutely. I was alone with my house in foreclosure, two small children to support and only a Sears credit card to help me. I noticed a neighbor was home a lot, and I asked him to teach me all about his scrap-iron business quickly, so I could work part of the day and be home with my children after school. I rented a truck, started collecting scrap and never worked so hard in my life. I learned later that he had worked so hard in his business that he had taken six months off to stay home and regain his sanity after years of 16-hour days.

So what is the secret to building a business from the ground up?

Hard work, long hours and beat your competition in every way. I had to get my kids to cooperate, so I told them if they stayed in school and behaved themselves so I could go out to work every day, we could stay in our house. Otherwise, I'd have to stay home, and we'd end up living in a horrible place because we had no money. I scared them so they never got in trouble.

What is your history with the Anti-Defamation League?

I have supported this dinner for years because it was created to honor women who are outstanding in their fields, who give back to the community and who support the philosophy of the ADL.

You serve on so many boards and are also co-chairing the campaign to build a Ronald McDonald House at the new Children's Memorial Hospital. How do you find the time?

I believe very strongly that you can never give enough. What you give is nothing to what you get back — that's been true my whole life.



MARY CAMERON FREY

**Anti-Defamation League's 16th Women of Achievement
Dinner**

When: 5:30 p.m. Thursday

Where: Fairmont Hotel, 200 N. Columbus Drive

How much: \$350 and up

Who'll be there: Around 600 women in business and supporters
of the ADL

For more info: (312) 782-5080, ext. 252

Next Monday: Check out our photo slide show of the gala at

ChicagoBusiness.com/society.