Myrna Deckert Remains Modest about Achievements
By Diana Holguin and Heather Coons

For most members of El Paso’s business community, this featured trailblazer needs no introduction. Not only is her name synonymous with the YWCA, but to mention her elicits descriptions like hard working, tenacious, a natural leader. She is businesswoman extraordinaire: Myrna J. Deckert.

Deckert was born in McPherson, Kansas. As a child, she moved to the San Joaquin Valley in California with her family. There she grew up with her two siblings, and later attended San Jose State College and College of the Sequoias, but it was the education she received at home from her father that carried her on to success.

Deckert adored her father. Jeanne McCarty, her friend and colleague, said in an article in Password, the journal of the El Paso Historical Society, “Her [Deckert’s] father ... said that if he could teach her but one thing in life, it would be how to work.” His lessons also instilled the ideals of peace, virtue and working together. McCarty stated, “How pleased he would be that he taught her so well.”

In 1958, the Army brought Ray and Myrna Deckert to El Paso. In “Humble Heroine,” an article in the El Paso Times in 1993, Deckert admitted that they didn’t even like the city when they first arrived. “We would complain about the sand, the weather and the dryness.” After being stationed for two years at Fort Bliss, Ray was discharged from the Army, and the couple soon moved to Fresno, Calif. “We didn’t realize the desert had gotten into our soul,” Deckert recalled.

In August 1977, Deckert told El Paso Times reporter Carol Viescas that the couple only lasted in Fresno a few months. “One evening the fog was rolling in. I was sitting at the dining table crying when Ray came in. I said, ‘I’m so homesick for El Paso,’ and he answered, ‘So am I.’ We missed our friends, the sun and all the wonderful things El Paso had to offer. So home we came with our baby – without employment.”

Deckert loves children, especially teenagers, and she went to work as the Youth Director for Asbury Methodist Church, where she remained for three years.

Then, in 1963, Deckert responded to an ad in the newspaper, and it changed the course of her life. She was hired as the youth-program director for the YWCA. Her goal was to bring teens together and develop their leadership skills, so she began a new program with only 20 girls at Irvin High School. That program developed into Y-Teens, for high school girls, and Y-Tweens, for middle school girls, which offered dances and slumber parties at the YWCA.

In 1969, Deckert was faced with a hard career decision when she was offered the job of associate executive director for the YWCA. Although Deckert had to leave a job she really loved, she accepted the new position. One year later, Deckert replaced retiring executive director, Katherine McIntyre.

“It scared me to death,” Deckert stated in the article “Humble Heroine.” “It took me three weeks before I moved into the office. I kept thinking, ‘Can I really do this?’” El Paso’s YWCA had just built and opened their new building at 1600 Brown St. According to Deckert, opening a new building made some people feel as if the YWCA was extending beyond its means. “They saw it as a white elephant. My goal was to prove them wrong.” And she did.

As executive director, Deckert pioneered many programs that would dramatically improve lives throughout the El Paso community. She wrote the proposal that received federal funding for the Residential Intervention Center, which later was taken over by the Lee and Beulah Moor Children’s Home. She also wrote the proposal to establish day care services at the YWCA. Other programs included through Deckert’s guidance included helping pregnant teens, working parents and homeless women and providing counseling, life planning and job development with referrals and placement at the Women’s Resource Center.

In her more than 30-year career with the YWCA, Deckert worked tirelessly 16 to 18 hours a day to improve the lives of countless individuals. In “Humble Heroine,” Deckert admitted that she what didn’t was a job, but a passion. “The values of this organization are so compatible with mine,” Deckert stated. “I’m so blessed and privileged to be doing something I love.”

With Deckert at the helm, the YWCA transformed into one of El Paso’s largest businesses, dramatically impacting the local economy. The Y expanded from one building to five branches, and the annual budget increased from $100,000 to $35 million when she left in 2002. In 1999, Deckert was voted one of the top newsmakers in El Paso, and because of the local association’s success, she assumed leadership of a national committee designed to recreate the YWCA nationwide.

When approached about her many achievements, though, Deckert quickly credits others. At the 2009 YWCA Women’s Luncheon, Deckert spoke of her colleagues as “dedicated women with a journey in mind, not a destination. Everyone I know is there to serve, to build a better community, region and world.”

Hiring the right people for the right job, and working well with them, is in fact part of Deckert’s genius, according to McCarty. “Work – Work With – and YW … for Myrna, it’s the W’s that make a difference.”

The YWCA isn’t the only area in which Deckert made a difference for El Paso. She has been involved with the United Way, UT El Paso’s Business Advisory Council, the Volunteer Bureau and LULAC. Deckert has been a Director of Texas Commerce Bank, trustee of Columbia Medical Center East, trustee of Texas Tech Medical Foundation Board and Leadership El Paso Chairs. Deckert also spent three years involved with the Paso Del Norte Group, in an effort to revitalize downtown.

During all these many projects and challenges, Deckert earned her MBA from the University of Beverly Hills in 1983. Add her husband, Ray, and her children, Shelly, Kim, Charles and Michael, and the countless foster children that Deckert brought into her home over the years, and one could only imagine her hectic schedule. In her interview with Viescas, Deckert chuckled, recalling how busy she was.

“When Mike was younger, someone asked him what his parents did for a living. He said I worked for the phone company, I was on the phone so much.”

But the greatest turning point and challenge in her life, according to Deckert, was her diagnosis with cancer in the early 1970s. In March 1995, Deckert told the El Paso Times that her diagnosis brought her face to face with her mortality. “It became very important to me to make my life make a difference.”

The difference Deckert’s life has made is witnessed by her many accolades and awards. In 1973, Deckert received the Hannah Solomon Award from the National Council of Jewish Women. In 1975, the American Association of University Women named her Woman of the Year. In 1980, Deckert was the recipient of LULAC 617’s Community Service Award. La Mujer Hispana gave her the Award of Merit in 1986. In 1990, the National Association of YWCA Executives named Deckert the Executive Director of the Year, and in 1991 she received the national YWCA’s Edith M. Lerrigo Award.

Deckert is a member of the El Paso Women’s Commission Hall of Fame, and she was inducted into the El Paso County Historical Society’s Hall of Honor in 1995. In 2003, the local YWCA established the Myrna J. Deckert Lifetime Achievement Award, and Deckert was the first recipient. But the true testimony of the difference she has made is in the changed lives of countless women, children and families throughout the El Paso community.

Today, Deckert’s demanding schedule has slowed down some, allowing her time for her favorite things, like reading, eating chocolate ice cream and catching some time on the golf course with her nine grandchildren, but the word “retirement” isn’t in her vocabulary. As the current CEO of Paso Del Norte Health Foundation, she is a staying power within the El Paso business community. As for tips on success, she emphasizes having a sense of humor, hiring people smarter than you are, taking risks, listening and having fun.

But one key to her success, according to Deckert, is staying out of public politics. There have been occasions when she has contributed to opposing candidates running for an office, but, according to the 1995 El Paso Times interview, that doesn’t mean she’s neutral on the issues. “From a political point of view, I try to stay real straight on this – I do not support political individuals publicly,” Deckert stated.

El Paso is lucky that it got under her skin all those years ago. Myrna Deckert is still one of this city’s hardest working professionals and she sees no reason to “retire” again as she already did twice. Her own mother worked until she was 85, after all. No, this is one superstar who will continue to shine for a long, long time.”