

CONVERSING WITH ...

\$299 monthly salary.

She couldn't afford the dorm, so she paid \$35 a month for unapproved housing, "complete with roaches, Army bunk beds, cardboard dressers and a folding table." But she also took only eight months to finish the coursework and develop enough connections to move to full time at DuPont, where she worked for five years in several business units.

"I might have been the secretary, but I was the hub," she recalled of her work in personnel, matching people and positions. When she left DuPont in 1975 to have her first daughter, the company replaced her with three people. But she and fellow DuPonter Leslie Curl wanted to do more than stay at home with their kids.

Their entrepreneurial spirit was ignited when they saw a News Journal article about wedding planning. After 18 months of research, they set up a resource library for brides in Fairfax. Przelomski's business plan was financially flawed, she realizes in hindsight, but the business helped her understand how image (some clients still recall her signature hats) and connections (she still recalls how she was treated back then) could be combined to create a company that planned corporate events.

Ernest Delle Donne was her first big client and his development firm still does business with her. Her second big break was with J.P. Morgan, relocating staffers following the 1981 Financial Center Development Act. Her bid to show off the area to potential transfers was turned down, but she gathered her chutzpah and called back: "You have to hire me," she said. "I have the last six buses in Wilmington." The bank did hire her – and the relationship went on for 17 years.

She was developing her firms at the same time that the special events industry was developing. She was one of the founders of the International Special Events Society.

"She is an icon in special events," said event planner Richard Carbotti, who has known her for more than 25 years. "She was one of the pioneers in the industry in America," citing her leadership in creating standards and emphasizing education.

"Many event designers follow trends, but Cher and crew come up with their own

– often humorous – take on a project. They strike a chord with attendees that many other event pros do not," said Lisa Hurley, editor of Special Events Magazine, which sponsors trade shows in which Przelomski has won first-place awards.

Although almost all of Przelomski's events are positive, even joyous, some elicit other emotions.

Like a 70th birthday party for Delle Donne's father, just diagnosed with cancer.

Or a corporate event in Mexico at which one of the attendees fell ill in the middle of the night. She helped to airlift him to the States.

How to plan a dinner party

The way you set your table is probably the most important element, event planner Cher Przelomski feels. Lots of glassware sends the message, "Wow, this is going to be some dinner." Colored plates, individual bud vases, candles and themed holders for the silverware all add to a festive mood. "And they can be rented!"

Her community campaign – to celebrate the Planning Factory's 25th anniversary – was to retrofit the Milltown home of Pedro Toala, a DART driver whose spine was broken in 2006 when young hoodlums upended the portable toilet he was using.

And a memorial service for Bobby Fangman, a flight attendant killed on 9/11, at his sister's home near Centreville. "It was like loaves and fishes," she recalls of planning for just a few, and so many showed up. "But there was enough for everyone."

Today, at age 58, she is still full of energy, although some is reserved for family. Daughter Jodie Steen owns a photographic company in New York and has one child. Daughter Lindsay Barnett works for Planning Factory Bermuda and with husband Fred, a former Eagle, is expecting Przelomski's second grandchild. Ed, Przelomski's husband, works for the Wilmington firm as art director.

Przelomski dreams of expanding to Dubai. "Everything they do is the highest quality," she said. "And I like that." She doesn't think of retirement. "I do not understand the concept."

And she has one other idea: To add life to cemeteries. Tombstones today are so gray, so drab, so limited in meaning. There will be no ordinary tombstone on her grave, she has told her children.

Inspired by the work of a friend – environmental artist and industrial designer Doron Gazit – she asks why tombstones couldn't be made out of clear acrylic or Lucite, perhaps with embedded audio or video. And she envisions that these monuments would shine with hope, "like diamonds in the sun."



With plenty of props in the Planning Factory International's warehouse, an industry colleague says Przelomski's team is "willing to do whatever it takes to make the project perfect."

FYI

Planning Factory International is based at 34 Germay Drive, southwest of Wilmington. 656-8400 or www.planningfactory.com.