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Women's luncheon stresses empowerment

By Sara Snyder

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APPLETON — The age of women's lib may be over, but when it comes to empowerment, the gender has a long way to go.

The nearly 1,000 professional women who gathered for the eighth annual Women's Fund for the Fox Valley Region fundraising lunch Thursday at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel heard that message loud and clear.

Keynote speaker Susan May, president and chief executive officer of Fox Valley Technical College, the first woman president of the institution, explained how she came to understand how women were viewed. In high school in the 1970s, her guidance counselor told her she had three choices: become a nurse, a teacher or a secretary.

"Frankly, it made me angry," she said.

May went on to earn an education degree, but didn't stop there. She took classes part time, spending seven years getting her master's degree and then, her doctorate.

She said more women should step up to the plate to be mentors, because still today there is a perception — and the reality — that women aren't as self-sufficient as men.

While Wisconsin ranks fifth in the nation with women in the work force, at 66.6 percent, only 29.8 percent of those positions are in professional or managerial jobs, she said. And, on the whole, women make 22 percent less than men for the same work.

Chris Grumm, the other keynote speaker, is the president and CEO of the Women's Funding Network in San Francisco. She helps to put not just money in the hands of women who need it, but makes sure women receive tools and education to change their lives.

Sue Fritz, with presenting sponsor Jewelers Mutual Insurance Co., said that as an idealistic collegian, she wondered why women's organizations existed. Then she entered the "real world" and only then, walking into roomfuls of men in professional situations, did she understand the importance of supporting women's initiatives.

"Women and girls aren't more important than men and boys, but we do things differently and that's OK," she said, adding that only through funding prevention and mentoring programs will the mindsets begin to change.

"We have to create more opportunities and raise expectations for girls," said Shauna Ejeh, executive director of the Women's Fund for the Fox Valley Region. "That's what we're about."