Having flirted with fame, Viola takes aim on the design market

By Mark Leslie

From arranging Jack Nicklaus’ home gardens to designing golf courses in the exotic West Indies, Lorrie Viola has made the quantum leap into golf course architecture that many young landscape architects merely dream about. Yet, after 10 years of working with the likes of Gary Player, George and Jim Fazio, and Karl Litten, Viola is still looking for the big break that will propel her into the ranks of “recognized” architects.

While the number of women in her profession can be counted on one hand, Viola has great expectations.

“I think everyone’s a little leery about being a guinea pig by hiring me,” said Viola, who has established L.A. Links Inc. in Farmington Hills, Mich. “It’s going to take a couple of courses by myself to start, and more people may follow suit.”

It’s a field she wants to remain in. “I always wanted to work in design. And I wanted to develop recreational-type facilities. Golf course architecture fits perfectly,” she said.

Viola feels her background sets her apart. She earned a landscape architecture degree from Michigan State University, culminating seven years of part-time study. “It made my BA more well-rounded,” she said. “Going into the business world, I have a better idea how to do marketing and management, whereas landscape architecture gave me no business background whatever.”

In between, she worked for golf course architect Bill Newcomb in 1983; moved to South Florida to work for two years with Nicklaus including his beloved gardens on his estate; worked another two years with George and Jim Fazio; then joined Player-Litten in 1987.

Though still working occasionally with Litten, Viola went out on her own in 1991. “Karl supported it. He provided renovation jobs he didn’t want to be involved with,” she said.

Viola, whose older sister Sherry, 36, broke into a male-dominated field as a physician before her, credits others with breaking the barrier in golf course design.

“We’re saying, ‘Here’s some acreage. You can do what you want with it; we’ll rent the money back... whether it’s residential, a family recreation area, or something else.”

Viola’s strong suit as a designer is her land-planning skills, she said, “something a lot of other designers don’t have. And that is something I understand well. I always look at that availability in case a project calls for it. Basically, you have to consider how the developer is going to make his money back... whether it’s residential, a family recreation area, or something else.”

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