



**Michelle Richards,
Executive Director**



Michelle Richards was a founding board member of the Great Lakes Women's Business Council, formerly known as the Center for Empowerment and Economic Development. She has served as the Executive Director since its inception in 1984. The Great Lakes Women's Business Council, a Michigan-based nonprofit organization, is a champion for women, minority and small business owners and provides access to capital and corporate procurement opportunities, certification for women-owned business enterprises and small business educational support.

Access to microcredit is one of the tools needed for economic justice. Under Richards' leadership, Great Lakes WBC began as one of the first microloan programs in the country in 1984. The small business loan program (CEED Lending), has made over \$ 5.5 million in microloans and created 1800 jobs across nine Michigan counties. President Bill Clinton visited the organization and its members to celebrate the achievements of this innovative loan program. The business training program has trained more than 15,000 women business owners.

In 1998, Richards played a vital role in the organization becoming a Regional Partner with the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) enabling Great Lakes WBC to provide women's business enterprise certification and procurement opportunities. WBENC is dedicated to advancing the success of certified women's business enterprises, government agencies and corporate members in partnership with its affiliated women's business organizations. Through the efforts of the Great Lakes Women's Business Council, every year Michigan and Indiana women's business owners can attribute many million dollars of contracts to the value of women's business certification.

As a national and regional advocate for women business owners, Michelle Richards has been honored with the following awards: Athena Award, Michigan Small Business Administration Women's Business Advocate of the Year Award, the Red Tape Buster Award from the National Association of Women's Business Owners – Greater Detroit. She was also recognized as An Influential Woman in Business by Business Direct Weekly Magazine. In 2005, Michelle was part of a professional delegation lead by Michigan State University's Center for Advanced Study of International Development that traveled to Ghana, West Africa to instruct on women's business development. In 2014, she was honored by the American Institute of Diversity and Commerce as a distinguished recipient of a Women's Business Enterprise Hall of Fame Award.

Her work has brought such leaders as 2007 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Muhammad Yunis, of the Grameen Bank, Maya Angelou noted poet and laureate and other notable advocates for business owners. Beyond accolades, Ms. Richards is in the trenches championing for level playing fields and advocating for women and minorities. She continues to demonstrate exceptional wisdom of business survival in an adverse economic environment for the benefit of the diverse business community she serves.