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HEADLINE: Women at event urged to seize life

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BODY:

Some 3,000 women -- and a few men -- descended on downtown Fresno Tuesday to listen to motivational speakers, attend personal growth and business workshops, and perhaps walk away enlightened.

The draw was the 13th annual Central California Women's Conference at the Fresno Convention Center and Exhibit Hall. And, as in years past, the conference was at capacity.

The event is one of most popular conferences in the Valley and the only one that caters specifically to women. Because of its diverse offerings -- exhibitors range from Estee Lauder cosmetics to Merrill Lynch -- the event is often difficult to describe.

The idea is to cater to women whether they are homemakers or banking executives, explained Susan Forrester, co-organizer of the event with colleague Mary Stabelfeld. "We don't want it to be a business conference," she said.

Workshop topics follow three paths at the conference: Business and careers, personal development, and life enrichment.

Conference speakers represented an eclectic mix.

The day's first speaker was Marcia Wieder, who once headed a \$3 million marketing company in Washington, D.C., but left it for speaking focused on inspiring others to pursue life's dreams.

This year's keynote speaker was actress/comedian Marcia Wallace, best known as Carol, the red-headed receptionist on "The Bob Newhart Show." Wallace also is the voice of Mrs. Krabapple, Bart's teacher on "The Simpsons," for which she won an Emmy.

Wallace had the crowd laughing one minute and nearly crying the next as she recounted the ups and downs of her career, her struggle with breast cancer and the death of her 47-year-old husband from pancreatic cancer. She is raising her 12-year-old adopted son alone.

On her breast cancer diagnosis, she said: "I caught it early, never got sick, and it never came back."

But her husband, Denny, didn't survive. "After my husband died, all I wanted to do was watch mindless talk shows," Wallace said. "Let me put it this way: Geraldo was too intellectual for me."

It was after she won her Emmy for "The Simpsons" and spent a night partying with close friends that she began to live again. "I started to laugh again."

Wallace peppered her speech with pleas for women to take control of their lives and their health.

She said she was horrified when her doctor nonchalantly assumed she would undergo a drastic mastectomy after diagnosis. After doing research on her own, she chose a lumpectomy -- a partial removal of the breast.

Women need to take charge of their lives, she said. "Women are caregivers; women don't always look out for ourselves," she said.

While Wallace's speech was the highlight, one of the most touching moments came when organizers paid tribute to Republican State Sen. Ken Maddy, who died in February.

It was Maddy who urged Forrester and Stabelfeld, legislative aides in his office, to start the women's conference. "Without him, we wouldn't be here," Forrester said.

Sponsors of the conference included Valley Children's Hospital, Gottschalks, State Sen. Chuck Poochigian, ABC 30 and The Fresno Bee.