

RANCHO SANTA FE WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

March 23, 2005

I am so pleased to be here to join you as you become part of the amazing new wave of women who are combining their skills, their experience, their talents and their funds to become major players in philanthropy. We have traditionally volunteered our time – I suspect most of you have spent many hours over the years on a variety of worthy causes – but now as we combine our time with our money and educate ourselves more fully about philanthropy we have a stronger voice and much greater impact on the issues that concern us in our community. Giving together – what a terrific concept and what power that gives us! I love the saying “As our knowledge grows, our influence multiplies.” Add our pooled money to that equation, and our influence multiplies many times over.

It used to be older white males who made the major philanthropic contributions, but now women have or control money in their own right, and we want to become more involved in where those dollars are going and what impact they are having. We used to be unrecognized and underdeveloped in the world of philanthropy, but the growing number of women's foundations around the country testify to the fact that is no longer the case. In fact, Colleen Willoughby, our founder and president, is this week working with a group similar to yours in Roanoke VA as they start their foundation. (It has been suggested that Oprah ought to dedicate a show to the subject – both to validate it and to strike a spark in others!)

These foundations bring together women with a wide range of philanthropic experiences – some of us have volunteered only time, some have left making donations up to their husbands, others have made small gifts to charity (and left the big ones up to their husbands), and others have no doubt made major gifts on a regular basis. The beauty of this kind of coming together is that we all learn from each other – and this process is definitely one of learning, from figuring out how to choose among the many requests we all receive to developing a personal philosophy of giving to guide our decisions. One of our members, for example, in speaking to a gathering of WWF members on her personal philosophy, shared that with the amount of funds she had available she would give to those organizations that lend a helping hand rather than those that pick up the pieces. Informed, educated, intelligent philanthropists – an admirable goal!

An aside - since I'm using the word “philanthropy” so much, I decided to look it up, particularly relative to “charity.” Here you are: “charity,” generous actions or donations to aid the poor, ill or helpless; “philanthropy,” altruistic concern for human welfare and advancement, usually manifested by donations of money, property or work to needy persons, by endowment of institutions of learning and hospitals, and by generosity to other socially useful purposes.” Synonyms for charity – kindness, sympathy; for philanthropy – love for mankind. How much broader in scope, and how much more stimulating, and challenging in many ways, philanthropy is than charity!

Now – some information about the Washington Women's Foundation. 10 years ago – Colleen's awareness of a disconnect between women's knowledge and experience and their willingness to act philanthropically. (Example of raising money for Camp Sealth, a Campfire Girls camp many Seattle-area women attended, a “quarter at a time.”) 100 women to give \$2000 annually for 5 years – board of 5. (The amount is now \$2300, with \$1000 going into the pooled fund, \$1000 into the pooled fund or up to 3 organizations of the member's choice, and \$300 toward educational and administrative expenses.)

We now have more than 400 members, and the board has been expanded to 11 members. The purpose of the foundation is to: 1) inspire women to become leaders in philanthropy; 2) strengthen community through strategic social investing; and 3) provide education in current issues and strategies in philanthropy.

First committee – Grants, to get the \$ out. Evolved into 5 areas – Health, Education, the Environment, Arts & Culture, Social Services. Created Discovery Days, held in Nov., where 2 leaders in each field discuss the cutting edge issues and offer opinions on where \$100,000 could best be spent. Open to members and guests. Our Grants Committee generally attracts about 50 people – it's the heart of the organization.

We do not limit our grant making to women's issues, but look for: 1) responses to urgent and critical need, 2) bold new ventures, and/or 3) new approaches to time-worn problems. Our grants have ranged from \$50,000-\$100,000, typically dispersed over 2-3 years.

Members are encouraged to bring projects to the attention of the committee, and also, organizations interested in making the Grant Committee aware of their work are invited to submit a Letter of Inquiry form, posted on our website. Those chosen to be considered submit Requests for Proposals to be reviewed by the subcommittees in these five areas. The subcommittees present five RFPs each to a gathering of the entire grants committee, at which point the number in each area is reduced to 3 that will receive site visits. Ultimately 2 in each area will appear on the ballot, which goes to all members. The top vote getters receive the largest grants. We have a large grants notebook with all the details, more than I can go into here, but we are happy to share information about how we do it.

Some of the things we consider are: what impact would a WWF grant make on the community; how much of a difference would it make relative to the budget of the agency; what is the sustainability of the organization after our grant is utilized; what alternate source of funds does the agency have, how much more leverage or credibility would they have in their community or among their peers with the grant; do they have partnerships with other organizations.

Other committees:

Education – Forums on, for example, the foster care system, childhood obesity, women's role in international development, board accountability, etc.

Membership – attain and retain members. Sponsor Neighborhood Gatherings.

Then a Cabinet, to bring the chairs and vice-chairs together with a board liaison, grow the leadership, broaden the base, exchange information, get feedback.

After 5 years, a Strategic Planning Committee, to look forward.

Finance – address sustainability. Now an annual fund and an endowment.

Impact Assessment – including EDs of agencies who have applied for or received grants.

Revisit grantees to evaluate use and impact of the grant.

Newsletter – events, members in the news, new members, bibliography of books on philanthropy, related events. Email and hard copy.

Stumbling blocks, errors – avoided by moving slowly, having structures in place, being comfortable with each step. “There is no elevator to success – you have to take the stairs.”

Issue – international giving, religious affiliation. Issue – continuity of leadership, adding staff. Key is to build community, keep members involved (even if they aren't on a

committee). Guilt-free zone is great, but members can feel removed – include them in neighborhood gatherings, utilizing skills, using homes, etc.

10th Anniversary – time of reflection,. Series of events/activities. Theme – utilizing artistically inclined members. Discovery Days (Nov.), Annual Meeting (Jan.-Feb.), Grants Awards gathering (June). Include guests.

Stories – Dr. Olson – \$50M over 3 years for Children’s Hospital Brain Tumor Clinic – seed money leveraged into millions, now housed at the Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. Planned Parenthood – Checkpoint program for middle school boys to promote responsible sexual behavior (Laura Bush now emphasizing needs of boys).

Now – if this isn’t enough – one of the most rewarding personal benefits of belonging to a women’s foundation is the chance to interact with, in my experience and that of my fellow WWF members, the most interesting, intelligent, caring women I have ever met. The women who join a foundation like this, making a major financial and often time commitment, are those who think beyond their front doors, beyond their immediate neighborhoods, and are concerned with the greater good. Statement from the head of the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation Leadership Institute – “leaders are those who elevate the level of the discussion.” Going home from a WWF gathering – grants committee, Discovery Days, grants awards – my brain is spinning, all the little synapses whipping into action, as it mentally go about solving the problems of the world.

At which point I will mention something that the health person said at Discovery Days, which she knew would surprise her listeners – the big problems in health are literacy and housing. If people have those (and in other countries, I might add, clean water) other problems take care of themselves. What a provocative thought – isn’t it interesting to come at an issue from a different perspective?

When Colleen asked me to come speak to you after talking to Gayle and Christy, the word she kept repeating was enthusiasm – “They’re so enthusiastic!” she kept saying, over and over. So in closing I share with you a quote from Henry Ford. “You can do anything, if you have enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is the spark in your eye, the swing in your gait, the grip of your hand, the irresistible surge of your will, and your energy to execute your ideas. Enthusiasm is at the bottom of all progress.” You have it, and by working and giving together you CAN do anything.

Laurie Besteman
Washington Women’s Foundation