



Funding Serious Change

She 'Bends Toward Justice' by Giving Her All

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By Laurie Emrich
WeNews commentator

Laurie Emrich recently pledged a million to the Women Moving Millions campaign. She figured that if she wanted to increase her efforts to help heal the world, there was no better time than now. Tenth in a series on women funding serious change.

(WOMENSENEWS)--I want to live in a world where cooperation, equity and justice thrive. To make that happen I try to follow the advice of 1960s rhythm and blues singer-songwriter Wilson Pickett: "Ya gotta shake whatcha brought whicha."

Part of what I now bring with me is financial wealth. And so I decided in early 2007 to participate in the Women Moving Millions campaign, making a million-dollar pledge that was allocated among the Washington Area Women's Foundation, and several international women's funds.

The purpose of the recently launched Women Moving Millions campaign is to effect lasting social change through improving the lives of women and girls worldwide. One of the ways they are achieving this is by intensifying women's philanthropy, encouraging women to go public about their large-scale gifts. They aim to increase the number of million-plus donors from 45 at the campaign's launch in 2006 to 150 (and more) by its close in April 2009.

Another part of what I bring with me is my core values. "Tikkun Olam," a Hebrew phrase that refers to "healing the world," is at the heart of my value system. Although the culturally Jewish family I grew up with in Colorado wasn't very "officially" religious (OK, maybe I wasn't officially religious), as I grew up the seeds of justice and social conscience were sewn deeply.

My father, the son of a pickle factory owner, conducted his business in the spirit of Tikkun Olam. He was always very generous, and he possessed a strong sense of social justice that imbued his work with a spirit of integrity and action. Early on he was involved in civil rights through the Urban League and, as an owner of Yellow Cab company, was the first in Denver to hire African American drivers. I watched my parents' example over the years and took life lessons from it.

Through inheritance in my 20s, I had sufficient money to not seek paid



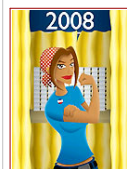
Laurie Emrich

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work. Yet, as a young person, I needed to know that I had the skills and ability to support myself. After grad school, for over 15 years, I worked with governments and nongovernmental organizations to assist in developing primary health care delivery systems in Africa.

The Commute to Full Engagement

I lived and worked in Kinshasa, Congo, for four years, where I met my life partner, Gael Murphy. Later we moved back to the United States, where I took on consulting assignments all over Africa from a base in Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, initial funds that I had inherited pretty much gathered dust because I was busy with my work, and also too ashamed to deal actively with them.

By the mid-1990s I decided that my work commute across the Atlantic was terribly impractical. So I cast my eye around for a set of more local, and now volunteer, consultancies. Though I was not truly conscious of this at the time, I began a different sort of commute, a journey to reconcile my egalitarian values and my reality as an inheritor of wealth.

I began to address my life of privilege, and the financial resources at hand in my 40s, joining various donor networks, including the Funding Exchange, Women Donors Network and Threshold Foundation. I became more systematic and extensive in my philanthropy, continuing to leverage systemic change rather than responding to societal symptoms.

At about the same time, I had the opportunity to act locally, becoming a founding board member of the Washington Area Women's Foundation. Socially and financially Washington, D.C., is an extremely bifurcated city, and the status of women in the region reflects that great divide.

Deepening Vision of Change

Established in 1998, the Women's Foundation drew me with its vision of social change and the heart-based values of its mission: to foster a powerful wave of philanthropy that would bridge the resource gap facing so many of the region's women and girls, and in so doing, improve their lives. The Women's Foundation supports local nonprofits specializing in diverse strategies to change the lives of women and girls: ranging from financial education and job training to affordable child care centers to programs that raise girls' self-esteem.

Recently the foundation has focused its work on a multi-million dollar initiative called "Stepping Stones" that helps build the economic security and financial independence of low-income, women-headed families by investing in job training, credit and budget counseling, and advocacy efforts that raise their wages, lead to homeownership and provide increased access to affordable, high-quality child care and education.

Over the last two years, we have helped women in the Washington metro area increase their collective assets by \$17 million, assisted more than 500 women to gain improved jobs and moved more than 100 women into home ownership.

I am very proud of the great strides the Women's Foundation has taken over the past decade, from granting an initial \$24,000 in 1998 to over \$1 million this year.

I have been a steady contributor to the Women's Foundation and a host of other national and international organizations. I believe strongly in giving multi-year, general support funding. Until recently, my gifts hovered in the



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five-figure category. I certainly don't have vast wealth, and yet the reality is that I have more financial assets than 90 percent of the world's citizens.

Belief in Taking Action

If I believe in justice, how can I accept the enormous and growing income inequality that characterizes today's world? If I support the reform of private foundation structure that allows them to accumulate billions in endowment assets, while putting only 5 percent of it to timely use to promote their missions, then shouldn't I apply that same logic to myself? If I believe in taking action, how can I justify sitting on my assets?

Key to my willingness to step up and step out with the Women Moving Millions campaign has been the personal leadership training I have participated in, led by an organization called Be Present Inc. that is based in Atlanta.

Dedicated to building sustainable leadership for social justice, Be Present offers an empowerment model of self-awareness, a way of listening to and communicating with others that is enabling me to reach across the lines of race and class, and to bridge differences of all kinds. Standing firm in that self-knowledge, increasingly I can build active and enduring personal relationships as well as lasting partnerships with social justice and nonprofit partners.

The experience I have gained from Denver to Kinshasa, from the Threshold Foundation to Be Present, has helped me to focus my giving, to create a mature long-term strategy, with my priorities identified and synergies engaged. It is a privilege for me to use my financial resources, and my time and energy, to participate in the long-term building of an inclusive, community-based, multi-racial movement for justice.

To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.

Laurie Emrich is an independent consultant, helping to launch, strengthen and build financial resources for regional, national and international social profit organizations. An individual donor herself, she uses those skills to advise family foundations and individuals on effective, social change grantmaking.

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