



Funding Serious Change

Story-Teller Found Her Passion in Giving

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By Barbara Bridges
WeNews correspondent

Barbara Bridges went from coupon-clipping to financial success in oil then had to search hard for a cause with which to share it. She struck it rich with the Women's Foundation of Colorado. Tenth in a series on women funding serious change.

(WOMENSENEWS)--Never in my wildest dreams as a girl would I have imagined that, one day, I would write a million-dollar check to the Women's Foundation of Colorado. My life has brought me a long distance, even though I am still in my middle years. I marvel at the possibilities I've had and at the opportunities for making the world better.



Barbara Bridges

I grew up in Pittsburgh, the daughter of a single mother, a Latin teacher, who struggled to make ends meet. But, in the spirit of the American dream, I was able to graduate from college with honors, after which I married a geophysicist. Our life together with a big oil company often took us to the drilling fields where sometimes we even slept in tents to live on our daily allowance.

We felt we might do better as entrepreneurs developing software for oil and gas exploration. Those early days were lean: clipping coupons, wondering how we could afford shampoo when it ran out, or how to get ourselves a turkey for Thanksgiving. Those hard-scrabble days are now distant.

In time, our company was successful beyond our wildest dreams. Then a whole new challenge arose: how to handle the responsibility of wealth.

I felt a strong desire to give back, but I had no idea how. As we formed family foundations, I found myself giving randomly to obvious organizations like the botanical garden and art museum. These are deserving causes, but the giving seemed unfocused and not very satisfying.

Searching for a Passion

In 2002 I learned that Denver's aquarium was in financial trouble. It had been started by a friend and I wound up giving a million dollars to help save it. I felt good about the gift, but I knew that my passion wasn't

fish. I still needed to find it.

In time I joined various women's organizations. This included the national board of the White House Project, where I learned about the importance of promoting women's leadership and getting their stories into the media. At last I felt passionately about something.

Closer to home, I began to learn about the work of the Women's Foundation of Colorado, I realized that their mission--to advance the economic success of Colorado's women and girls--closely aligned with my own values.

The 'Cliff Effect'

In the course of this work I learned that almost 300,000 women and girls in Colorado live below the poverty line, and that about twice as many live below the level of self-sufficiency, requiring some public assistance. I have learned about the "cliff effect," where women turn down raises that would get them closer to self-sufficiency because they would lose public assistance benefits that are worth more than the raise itself.

The Women's Foundation of Colorado makes grants to an array of organizations that help women with the assistance that they need right now. But perhaps the most important work of the foundation is its research and advocacy role, which is poised to effect policy that will have deep and wide effects on these women and girls and, of course, the families who are lifted up when women are lifted up.

And so I made another million-dollar gift. I have joined the board of the Women's Foundation of Colorado. And I have invested time as well as money in the process of telling the stories of the amazing women who are doing the work to change Colorado by changing the life trajectories of its women and girls.

Sharing Stories of Courageous Women

I have made my first video of these stories, with more to follow. These women are smart and courageous; they are now my role models and friends. It is an honor to be working with women who share a vision of justice, equality and safety for women and girls in my state, and in my world.

The first video was shown at the Women's Foundation of Colorado's annual lunch and helped the 2,600 women in attendance meet on film some of the women aided by their donations. Other videos focus on the cliff effect and the foundation's endowment campaign. My role is to bring the people together to create these videos and, with the staff and others, help form their vision and purpose.

I have been told that never in the history of the world have women come together to support other women with philanthropic dollars. My million-dollar gift is part of a global campaign, Women Moving Millions, which aims to raise \$150 million for women's foundations around the world and which, at this writing, has already raised \$80 million.

By making women economically self-sufficient, half the population becomes equal participants in society. That phenomenon ripples out to families, to communities, to the wider world.

It is an honor to lift up their stories, and it is an honor to tell my own.

Barbara Bridges has been an entrepreneur, businesswomen, philanthropist and mother of two sons. Her family foundation focuses on issues involving women, children and peace. She is on the board of the White House Project, chairs the advisory board for PeaceJam, which was just nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and most recently the Women's Foundation of Colorado. After being the executive producer of a feature film, Barbara joined the board of the Denver Film Society and created the Women and Film program.

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