

▶ Twenty-Five Years Advocating for Women and Girls

The Women's Foundation of Colorado Anniversary Luncheon

BY JUDITH B. TAYLOR

Innovation is a term thrown around a lot in today's business world. Companies want to innovate and change, to adapt to what consumers and customers need. Most companies miss one key element—in order to innovate, a company must have leaders who also believe in innovating themselves.

Since its establishment, the Women's Foundation of Colorado has invested millions of dollars in nonprofit organizations throughout the state to dramatically change the lives of women and girls. Its mission is clear: to build resources and lead change so that every woman and girl in Colorado achieves her full potential.

The Women's Foundation mission is met through research, education, advocacy and collaboration; the agenda is intended to lead systemic change, creating greater opportunities for success in the 21st-century economy. The scope of what the foundation faces and the efforts made over many years have been challenging at many levels.

"The issues have existed for years. The barriers are far more complex," said Louise Atkinson, president and CEO of the Colorado's Women's Foundation.

High school dropout rates, the numbers and plight of single mothers, and the number of women in poverty in Colorado are the reality for the Women's Foundation of Colorado.

The issues are mirrored by disturbing numbers. Last September at the twenty-fifth anniversary luncheon, former and current board chairs delivered the current statistics in a ceremonial fashion by pouring sand into a vase while delivering the numbers in a solemn manner.

- Each year, 32,000 girls are born in Colorado (Colorado Department of Education).
- Of those 32,000 girls born each year in Colorado, at the current dropout rate, 20 percent will not graduate from high school (Colorado Department of Education).
- Another 5,479 of those in the 20 percent will have babies of their own before they turn 20 years old.



The Women's Foundation of Colorado has invested millions of dollars to dramatically change the lives of women and girls.



» Geena Davis and Women's Foundation President & CEO, Louise Atkinson.

- There are 346,000 women in Colorado living in poverty (Colorado Center for Law and Policy).

While the numbers are daunting, board members present and past spoke about a call-to-action for the Women's Foundation work and a commitment to the following principles:

- Boldly leading systemic change that will advance economic opportunities for all women and girls in Colorado;
- Using exceptional research to build a knowledge base and guide the actions of the Women's Foundation of Colorado;
- Building up a community of philanthropy that supports and advocates for women and girls in Colorado;
- Prompting inclusiveness and dedication to diversity in the people and causes the Women's Foundation works for, including the partners the foundation works with and the ideas the foundation champions;
- Creating strategic partners across the state in order to fulfill the foundation's mission.

The foundation has worked tirelessly and successfully to affect state legislation and provides struggling women with a chance of self-sufficiency. One example is the long effort that resulted from the Cliff Effects Study. This study provided evidence that a full-time job at low wages is not enough to make ends meet. The cause lies in the current structure of work support programs, including rapid "phase-out" rates, which lead to what is known as "cliff effects."

Although federal and state work supports assist low-wage workers and their families with benefits such as earned income tax credits, child care subsidies, health care coverage and food stamps, the benefits are means-tested.

As earnings increase—particularly as they rise above the official poverty level—families begin to lose eligibility even though they are not yet self-sufficient. The result is that parents can work and earn more without their families achieving financial security.

In 2012, Senator Suzanne Williams (D-Aurora) and Representative Tom Massey (R-Poncha Springs) co-sponsored SB22, bipartisan legislation that creates an optional pilot program allowing county governments to extend the eligibility period for the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program within their county from six months to two years.

The pilot program allows children to remain in important early child care, gives parents the ability to work and advance their careers, provides employers with stable workers, and will hopefully mitigate the "cliff effect" and help struggling families.

The measure was signed by Governor Hickenlooper on Friday, April 13, 2012. » *CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.*

“In 1920, 57 percent of movies had women leads; in 2011, it is down to almost 15 percent. We need to add women on the screen and behind the camera.”

- Geena Davis

The Women's Foundation of Colorado plans ongoing investment and management of collaborative efforts to bring these issues to fruition in the form of systemic reform legislation, building on the impact of SB22's pilot project.

In September at the Colorado Convention Center, the founding group of the Colorado Women's Foundation, and the many who have followed, were part of the 25th anniversary celebration luncheon. At the luncheon, Academy Award-winning actress Geena Davis complemented the advocacy for women theme. Davis shared the realities of the film industry today and women's roles.

“Of the characters in movies, 17 percent are women,” Davis said. Her advocacy work including the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media has incorporated studies reflecting gender equality in the media and the portrayal of women.

“There is more TV, yet girls have less options,” Davis added. “In 1920, 57 percent of movies had women leads; in 2011, it is down to almost 15 percent. We need to add women on the screen and behind the camera.” Davis, who is raising one daughter and two sons, noted. “Young girls are being hyper-sexualized by the media, and women and girls often appear without value. The work to reach some balance will take many years and an ongoing effort,” she said.

For someone who was cast in a television role as the first female president of the United States, Davis's challenging message resonated with the audience of more than 2,000. It was fitting that she delivered that message at the 25th anniversary luncheon of the Colorado Women's Foundation.

Indeed, the future is challenging, but already the Colorado Women's Foundation is planning to unveil a 2013 advocacy agenda based on updated research from the Institute of Women's Policy. The agency was hired by the foundation to conduct in-depth research throughout Colorado.

“The data that we get drive us,” Atkinson said. “Economic security, education and women's leadership are key top areas. We are very excited to help more women reach their full potential.” ▲

► PBS Features Somaly Mam in the first night of *Half the Sky*



» Somaly Mam on opening night

In June 2010, ICOSA featured a story on Cambodian-born human rights activist Somaly Mam. Born to a tribal minority in the Monduliri province of Cambodia, Mam grew up as an orphan, living in extreme poverty, and as a young girl she was sold into sexual slavery by a man who posed as her grandfather.

Forced to work in a brothel along with other children, Mam was brutally tortured and raped on a daily basis. One night, she was made to watch as her best friend was viciously murdered. Fearing she would meet that same fate, Mam heroically escaped her captors and set about to build a new life for herself. She vowed never to forget those left behind and has since dedicated her life to saving victims and empowering survivors.

In 1996, Somaly established a Cambodian

nongovernmental organization called AFESIP (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire), and in 2007 launched the Somaly Mam Foundation. Her shelters provide an education and job skills to girls as young as four years old, all the while applying public and international pressure to push police to crack down on the worst brothels and to undermine the sex-trafficking business model. Mam has been instrumental in shedding much-needed light on the plight of thousands of vulnerable young women and girls. She says, “If you want to buy a virgin, it's not easy now.”

Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide includes a four-hour television series for PBS and international broadcast, shot in 10 countries: Cambodia, Kenya, India, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Liberia and the United States. Traveling with intrepid reporter Nicholas Kristof and A-list celebrity advocates, the series introduces women and girls who are living under some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable—and fighting bravely to change them.

The series, along with its complimentary tools, raises awareness to the plight of women worldwide and provides suggestions and concrete steps to tackle the problems. The series premiered in the United States Oct. 1 and 2, 2012. Look to your cable provider to find viewing times or visit online, at www.pbs.org/independentlens/half-the-sky/. ▲

Camp To Belong Colorado

Camp To Belong and its founder, Lynn Price, of Highlands Ranch, Colorado, will be featured on **BYUtv's** *Turning Point*.

Turning Point is a collection of inspiring stories about people whose lives have changed irrevocably due to one pivotal decision. In 1995, Price became a court-appointed special advocate for children in foster care and a volunteer at a children's shelter. While spending time with these children, she discovered that of the almost 500,000 youth in the American foster care system, 75 percent are separated from at least one sibling.

This staggering statistic, combined with her own personal experience, turned out to be the spark that ignited the development of Camp To Belong.

Camp To Belong is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to reuniting siblings placed in separate foster homes and other out-of-home care for events of fun, emotional empowerment and sibling connection. The main events are week-long summer camps along with camper reunion events throughout the year.

Camp To Belong Colorado is led by sisters and longtime Camp To Belong volunteer counselors Charlie and Sam Lippolis. Next summer foster care siblings from around Colorado will spend five nights and

six days participating in activities together, such as horseback riding, rafting, swimming, wall climbing, fishing and ropes courses. Signature programs such as a sibling birthday party for all campers, sibling pillow creations, lifetime scrapbook making, life seminars and more intentional programming will bring inspiration to each individual camper and memories between siblings.

Camp To Belong has successfully brought together more than 4,500 brothers and sisters ages 8 to 18 since 1995. With 10 current member camps, Camp To Belong has been recognized by the White House and Oprah.

To watch a live stream, go to byutv.org, or to learn more about Camp To Belong, go to www.campbelong.org. ▲