

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Jan. 25, 2011

With charity comes sacrifice

BY CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN

cgoodman@miamiherald.com



PETER ANDREW BOSCH / MIAMI HERALD

Nancy Brinker, founder and CEO of the Susan G. Komen For the Cure, spoke at The Commonwealth Institute luncheon on Thursday, Jan. 20, at the Four Seasons Hotel in Miami.

Just days ago, I sat across from Nancy Brinker, who cause, to give your time and expertise without it taking over your life? Can you grow a charity, earn an income, and maintain balance?

Today, the interest in launching charitable foundations and growing them is huge. There are more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, a jump of 31.5 percent in the last decade. Most are public charities. They are founded and nurtured by women and men of all ages who want to find a cure for a disease, improve the environment or educate the public.

For Brinker, Susan G. Komen for the Cure started with a promise to her dying sister 32 years ago. She started her grass-roots effort with local fundraisers and expanded to races around the world. She even pioneered the concept of pink products in the movement now known as cause marketing. She warns anyone thinking of forming a foundation: "There's no exit strategy. No buyout. The only buyout is seeing results of what you've done."

Brinker told me she has communicated her vision over and over, making it personal and enlisting others to rally for her cause. She says success takes mining your business expertise, leveraging your contacts, building a strong team, and having goals but remaining flexible. "If you are a leader, you must lead."

She's discovered, as others do too, it's easy to let other areas of your work or home life suffer when you build a charity. It requires sacrifices. "You can't just grow big and not lead."

In Miami, creating and building a foundation has been a bittersweet process for Barbara Singer who started the Diabetes Institute Research Foundation when doctors diagnosed her then 2-year-old daughter with the disease.

Like Brinker, she hands off responsibilities such as chairing events, selling tickets, offering their contact lists or making phone calls. "We try . . . to help volunteers focus attention on things they will be most effective at without being overwhelmed," Singer says.

A LEGACY

Singer says it's been a struggle to balance her family and the foundation, and at times, her children have felt slighted. "Once you start, it's difficult to put the brakes on."

Yet, when her daughter died of complications from diabetes, it was the foundation that provided comfort. "In many respects we're a family. I can't give up. This is her legacy."

Most important, if you do take on a foundation, recognize your tipping point. Lisa Gwynn launched a foundation when life dealt her a blow. Lisa is married to former champion NHRA driver Darrell Gwynn, who won dozens of national drag races before a 1990 accident left him paralyzed. Shortly after the accident, she and Darrell started the Darrell Gwynn Foundation to provide health services to spinal cord injury patients and fund paralysis research and education.

After 10 years of working as a pediatrician, raising a daughter, caring for Darrell and building the foundation, Lisa says the demands became overwhelming. She was arguing with her husband and feeling exhausted. "I knew I had to step away and let go."

Three months ago, Lisa took a new full-time job, as medical director of the Pediatric Mobile Clinic program at UM School of Medicine. She encourages her 10 staffers at the foundation, including an executive director, to make good decisions independently as she transitions into more of an oversight role. "I'm learning to become confident in my team. I'm going through all the emotions," she admits.

STAY FOCUSED

Only 24, Danni Washington represents the young generation of givers and doers. Washington formed The Big Blue and You foundation while still in high school to teach children about ocean conservation. Now, she works two part-time jobs to earn enough to support her while keeping her foundation going. "I'm constantly trying to work on time management," she says. At times, Washington has considered taking on yet another job to make extra money. But she resists. "I know if I do that, I'll lose my focus."

Brinker convincingly told the women of The Commonwealth Institute South Florida, a mentoring organization, that anyone who focuses on contributing, regardless of how busy they are, can accomplish change. She urges contributing manpower to the plethora of existing foundations, rather than starting new. "Use your platform," Brinker said. "You are amazingly powerful because you are one, two or four steps away from someone who has a pen and can sign a check or a bill that will impact a cause close to you."

Cindy Krischer Goodman is CEO of BalanceGal, a provider of news and advice on how to balance work and life. She can be reached at balancegal@gmail.com or read her columns and blogs at <http://worklifebalancingact.com>.