

Changer and the Changed: Women Social Entrepreneurs

Cincinnati Women's Business

*Sometimes life seems to get the best of me
I'm only one, what difference does it make?
Then apathy fights for the rest of me and say
"Why bother? No one's listening anyway?"*

*It's times like these silence seems to make sense
and not caring seems to be the better choice
Who am I to think that I could even make a dent?
Who am I to think that I could have a voice?*

*But Spirit does not listen, does not hesitate!
Says, "I AM THAT I AM so WE can be
One Spirit living wide awake,
One heart to write, One soul who's listening!"*

*And then I see the God in me being all that I can be
These words teaching me to speak and teaching you by listening.
And then I see the God in you when I stop—and listen too
And where two or more are gathered, there's NOTHING We can't do!*

© Tracy Ann, "Anthem for Women Writing for (a) Change"

Singer-song-writer-performer Tracy Ann ("I'm a social entrepreneur and didn't know it!") Cormican captures in her music and in her life, the essence of women creating mission-based ventures in the Cincinnati area, all "living wide awake, all saying, "I Am so We can be."

"I just knew I wanted a connection with the audience," Tracy explains during a recent interview. "What I do comes out of such a deep place in me that it's hard to pour it into the usual formats, "gigs" at clubs and coffeehouses."

Connection. Meet a group of women with a passion to connect! Social entrepreneurs might be said to be women creating "formats" which not so much defy, as re-define, the usual categories of a business, an agency, a nonprofit. Their visions shape the format, rather than format shaping the vision.

As a college student majoring in special education, Mary Campbell dreamed of creating her own school. As life unfolded, however, Mary spent her early career working in an agency, rising to the position of program director at Cincinnati Restoration, Inc. In 1988, Mary left the agency. "I had a nine-year-old son, little money in the bank, and I decided I needed to spend a while doing anything but mental health work." Little more than a year later, Mary's friend, Mary Rose Geckle dropped a packet on Mary's doorstep and said, in effect: *ok, here's your chance—the county's accepting proposals for new models, ways to meet the mentally ill as they are being de-institutionalized; you always wanted to have your own agency, create it from the ground up—go for it!*

“I was a clinician; I didn’t know jack about business, management, nonprofits, but I knew something about meeting the mentally ill where they were—literally, we met them at the doors of the institutions as they left, and asked, *what do you need?*” Connecting—clients with services, with places to live, people with people was the mission of Queen City Management, “an agency of her own” built around what Mary knew at what she calls a “core level.” Queen City grew exponentially as the pace of de-institutionalization quickened. But the changer also faces change, so when the funding climate shifted for treatment of the mentally ill Mary strategized the merger of Queen City with her former agency, CRI, and retired. “It was worth it all, doing something the way I fully believed in, and—I hope and believe—contributing to a common sense way of helping people deal with real things—not things *we* think they need.” Now living in Indianapolis, Mary consults with nonprofits, and provides executive coaching for women managers and entrepreneurs.

Shannon Carter did—does-- “know jack” about business. An art major at Wheaton College, Shannon loved the bustle of shop-life on Newbury Street in Boston. Back in Cincinnati, Shannon opened The Shop for Pappagallo in Hyde Park, connecting her love of color and beauty with the challenge of creating a shop of her own. The practice of *listening to others* emerges in Shannon’s story of social entrepreneurship too. Shannon tells of visiting public schools as part of her Leadership Cincinnati training, and listening to teachers tell of having to provide school supplies for students with money from their own pockets. “One teacher was actually selling pencils for a nickel before class so students could work math problems!”

When Shannon’s Leadership Cincinnati team hit upon the idea of a free store for teachers—a social entrepreneurship—Crayons to Computers-- was born! “We had a dream team,” Shannon remembers: “a lawyer who helped us get our non-profit status, an accountant, an architect, a fundraiser—and I, well, I knew retail!”

“The stars aligned, and I was able to become the engine that made it go. I had time; my children were 16 and 22; I was in transition as a mother, and in my work life. I followed the path of feeling good, and I continue to. I’m driven by ideas, awake in the night with possibilities for how we can unleash more creativity.”

Lucia Castellini was in transition too. A career teacher, and vowed member of the Ursulines of Brown County, Lucia turned 50 and took stock. “I figured I’d be in ministry for another 25 years, and I decided to take a sabbatical to consider how best to use those years.” At Place of Blessing retreat center in New Hampshire, Lucia told a career counselor, “believe it or not, I love cleaning.”

It would be tempting to write, *and voilà First Step Cleaning Company was born.!* In fact, it both does and doesn’t happen that way for social entrepreneurs. The learning curve is long, but time really does fly when you’re doing what you love, and when you trust that what—and how, and whom-- you love will bear fruit in the world.

Lucia connected her love of cleaning with the charisma of Ursuline foundress, Angela DeMerici, who was a social entrepreneur in 16th century Italy, creating her “Company” of committed women to serve the needs of that time and place. Sandy Bates, a sister Ursuline, joined Lucia’s venture after leaving her position as elementary school principal. Eleven years later, Sandy and Lucia have two ministries: First

Step Cleaning “trains women to become self-sufficient by developing and perfecting skills in house-cleaning.”

Sandy and Lucia also serve as co-directors of Hope Emergency Program, one of the few agencies equipped to provide help for low-income residents in Brown and surrounding counties.

Call it a ministry, create it as a business, make it a nonprofit—write it in a song, the containers differ, but into these disparate shapes social entrepreneurs pour the richness of their life experience, their passion to serve, their need to create and innovate----and voilà-- become part of a world-wide movement: Social Entrepreneurship!

“The job of a social entrepreneur is to recognize when a part of society is stuck and provide new ways to get it unstuck. He or she finds what is not working and solves the problem by changing the system, spreading solutions and persuading entire societies to take new leaps. Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish or teach fishing. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry.” (Ashoka Society for Social Entrepreneurship, www.ashoka.org)

Mary Pierce Brosmer is a social entrepreneur, Founder of Women Writing for (a) Change, *helping individuals and organizations craft more conscious lives through the art of writing and the practices of community.* www.womenwriting.org

Read more about social entrepreneurship

- * [*How to Change the World - Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*](#)
by David Bornstein, a journalist who specializes in writing about social innovation
- * [*Knowing History, Serving It. Ashoka's Theory of Change*](#)
by William Drayton, CEO and Founder of Ashoka, September 2003
- * [*The Entrepreneur's Revolution and You*](#)
by William Drayton, President and Founder of Ashoka, August 2000
- * [*The Meaning of "Social Entrepreneurship"*](#)
by J. Gregory Dees, Stanford University
- * [*Social Entrepreneurship: Towards an Entrepreneurial Culture for Social and Economic Development*](#)
by Susan Davis, International Board Selection Committee, Ashoka