

Networking Times, Vol 1, Issue 2, August 2002

“Elizabeth Weber: You Just Have to Give

by John David Mann

Super-successful networker Elizabeth Weber wasn't satisfied giving money to foundations and never seeing the results-so she started her own (very hands-on) charity: The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands.

Life wasn't easy growing up in the Cambridge projects, then in Somerville; I saw some pretty tough conditions."

Elizabeth Weber remembers what it was like to struggle against the odds and feel like they were stacked against her. She also remembers those rays of hope brought by people she now refers to as "guardian angels."

"I'll never forget certain people who stepped into our lives to help us out at times. My nana, for example. She was not as poor as my parents: she had a little pool she'd take us to on weekends. We thought she was fabulously wealthy!

"I knew, way back then, that I wanted to be successful and I told myself that if I ever did, I would help other people who could not help themselves."

Elizabeth never lost the thread of that thought, though it would take years to pick it back up and fully realize it. The next few decades were all about the pragmatic business of raising a family and financial survival.

Fresh out of Somerville High School, Elizabeth entered a degree program in business administration but never quite finished it. She got as far as an Associate Degree in Secretarial Science. "I just wasn't cut out for the classroom," she confesses. She was so close to finishing her BA in Business while working as a secretary for a Boston law firm, a career that lasted 18 years, but never completed her degree.

During that time, Elizabeth and her husband Bruce also gave direct sales a try more precisely, nine tries. In the early 80's, they tried building in a network marketing company that has since become huge, but to no avail.

"I couldn't even hit the first achievement level!, exclaims Elizabeth. I worked hard in a number of different networking companies, but I could never seem to earn much more than \$1000 a month. It just never clicked..."

...And Then, It Clicked!

Ten years ago, a friend asked Elizabeth to evaluate a new networking company that had just recently launched. The more she looked at it, the more excited she grew and the more nervous Bruce got. At this point in their marriage, Elizabeth was the breadwinner, while Bruce was home taking care of the kids, along with a little construction work here and there. The two had vowed they would never take a shot at a sales opportunity again; when she announced that she was going to pay the company a visit "just to evaluate it" for her friend Bruce was less than pleased.

"I wasn't even considering it for myself," Elizabeth insists; "but the truth is, I guess I knew even then, deep down in my heart, that if I ever found the right vehicle, I would make it big. I'm a hard worker, and I love to help people."

For Elizabeth, it was also a matter of timing: she was truly tired of her job, which she saw as a dead-end position that wasn't going anywhere. "There comes a point in your life," she says, "where you realize that unless you do something, everything's just going to stay the same forever."

She flew out to look at the company; when Bruce met her at the airport, she said, "Honey, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is, we're going to be rich. The bad news is, I'm quitting my job you'll have to go get one to support me." She gave notice that Monday: her nearly two decades as a legal secretary were over.

"Everybody thought I was nuts, but something inside me said, 'This is going to be huge, go for it.'" And go for it she did with a vengeance.

Success At Last

"I put my back against the wall, worked 80-hour weeks, and moved a lot of product. Bruce was wonderful: he stayed home and watched the kids while I did the business. (Bruce Adam and Ashley were nine and six at the time; today Ashley is 16 and Bruce Adam is in college.)

"Within 90 days of starting I knew this was going to work; after four months, I was earning six figures. I earned over \$150,000 that year; by year five I was earning over a million annually and it has increased every year since."

Even after a decade in the business and a huge organization that is the classic residual dream come true, Elizabeth works hard for her network and continues sponsoring new people into the business at an average of at least one a month.

"I love it; I'm passionate about it; I'll never stop. I'm sponsoring two people tomorrow. I mean, I keep it sane I don't put in the same hours I did in the beginning. But I put in a good eight to 12 hours a week."

Why is she still at it?, we ask. She answers without hesitation:

"My goal is to get *everyone* earning money. If I can affect one more life, it's worth it."

As her business grew, Elizabeth soon found a powerful avenue for realizing her childhood "guardian angel" dream and a way to affect *many* more lives.

Helping People Who Can't Help Themselves

Through her networking business, Elizabeth had found a way to help people help themselves; but she wasn't satisfied.

"I wanted more. I wanted to be able to help people who *cannot* help themselves."

From early in her business, Elizabeth had habitually given ten percent of her income to charity; even in the early days when the income was modest, she always gave away that ten percent. As her income increased, so did the ten percent.

"Pretty soon I was giving away a really large amount of money and I began to realize that I didn't really know where it was going."

The secretary-turned-entrepreneur had helped put on some large fund-raisers for various charities, such as Children's Wish Foundation and the American Cancer Society; she co-founded the Bike for Life in 1997. But she gradually began to realize just how much of the money they were raising was siphoned off for administration and other costs.

"In some charities, I've heard only ten percent of the money actually gets through!," she exclaims. "It upset me terribly. I wanted to put a face to the money I was giving away; I wanted to see it working. That's when I realized I wanted to start my own foundation. But how?" The answer would not be long in coming. Says long-time friend Connie Spellman, Betty is the most driven person I know; she's a real go-getter. When she sets her mind to something, it gets done. Nothing demonstrates that portrait more vividly than the genesis of The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands (www.theweberfoundation.com).

I could never have accomplished all this without my success in network marketing. This would have been tough to pull off on a secretary's salary!

Founding a Foundation

For the couple's 20th wedding anniversary in 2000, Bruce and Elizabeth had decided to invite 200 friends, hold a huge ceremony and renew their vows. After they sent out the invitations, their friends began to call, asking what they could get the couple as gifts.

"I kept saying, 'Don't get us anything, I don't want anything just come!'" laughs Elizabeth. But to no avail: friends are friends, and an anniversary is an anniversary: "They said, 'Listen, we're going to get you something anyway so just tell us what.' I thought, what on earth can I ask for from my friends?"

Then inspiration struck.

Elizabeth and Bruce had heard about the plight of a local boy, Robbie Sorrentino. Robbie was suffering from leukemia; in addition to the physical and emotional ravages, the disease was devastating little Robbie's family financially.

"I thought, Hey, instead of having people give us gifts, we could have them give contributions the money can go to Robbie. I could start my foundation!"

Elizabeth worked fast. The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands was officially established on October 4; the couple's friends were all asked to give contributions in lieu of gifts. Four days later, they were celebrating their anniversary, renewing their vows and announcing the birth of their philanthropic venture.

"The event was so huge, the *Boston Globe* did a big write-up on it. People in Boston were trying to figure out why there was a huge fireworks display going off over Boston Harbor in the middle of October!--we used the same company that does the Fourth of July in the City of Boston every year."

Since that eventful October nearly two years ago, the Weber Foundation raised more than \$100,000 its first year and gave it away to 18 individuals and families in need, most of them New Englanders, who have found themselves in the grip of life-threatening illnesses or other catastrophic situations. And the total percentage of that money that goes to administration? Zero.

"All administration is either donated, or I pay for it so that the money that is contributed goes directly to the people who need it," says Elizabeth proudly.

This spring, the Foundation held their first annual Spring Ball; over 350 people attended; they raised over \$75,000 and gave out \$30,000 in grants that same night. "We gave out \$10,000 to a young woman who needed a double lung; \$6000 to a little boy with a rare disorder, who doesn't even have a home; \$6000 to a family who can't get insurance money to pay for treatments for their son who is dying from a brain tumor; another \$6500 to a woman with Lou Gehrig's Disease all she wants to do is spend one summer with her two daughters before she goes into a nursing home." And \$1600 to Dana Farber Cancer Institute to help a single mom with a 4-year-old child stricken with cancer rent an apartment for her and her four children. In total, the foundation to date has raised over \$175,000 and given 29 grants to people in dire need.

The range and diversity is typical: one of Elizabeth's goals was to create a foundation that would not be defined or limited by a particular cause or illness.

"Most of the existing foundations and charities are extremely specific, explains Elizabeth; we wanted to help the people who fall through the cracks, who don't fit the definitions."

For example, Elizabeth tells about how she just got a letter from the grandparents of a little boy who is sick. The elderly couple had written to twelve different foundations and not gotten even a response from a single one. Finally, they'd written to Elizabeth: they wrote to her on a Thursday and had their grant that Saturday.

The Need to Give

Elizabeth stands back and reflects on the last two years' experience.

"In a way, it's just as rewarding seeing the impact on the people who give the money, and on those who help in the operation. It's not just about helping those who are in such dire need. It's also about opening people's minds: people who aren't in such dire need to receive, but are in just as much need only their need is to give. You help people realize that there are all these less fortunate people out there who are in need and that it doesn't take that much to help them."

Do people look at her, we ask, and say, *Well, sure Elizabeth has the time and money to give away: she's pulling in over a million a year!*

"Sometimes, yes, I think so. It's true, I could never have accomplished all this without my success in network marketing. This would have been tough to pull off on a secretary's salary! And even more than the money, it's the time. The Foundation work is incredibly time-consuming; I work at it constantly, Requests for grants come in every week. People can only volunteer so much of their time; I make up the difference.

"At the same time, people who think they don't have it to give are the ones who need to give it the most! It doesn't matter how much you give; what's important is just to give. When you give, you are saying thank you for what you already have, and you open yourself up to having a more rewarding and fulfilling life."

John David Mann is Editor of Networking Times.