

## Women in Leadership Highlights September 23rd, 2011



### Trying to Repair the World: from Journalism to Philanthropy: featuring Penelope McPhee, President and Trustee, Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation

Throughout Penny McPhee's career, she has held a range of positions, but her basic belief and goals have always come back to the basic principle of *Tikkun Olam*. *Tikkun Olam* is a mandate in the Talmud that means "to repair the world." It is a basic belief that one has the responsibility to make the world a better place. Penny's career in journalism and philanthropy has allowed her to put this belief into action.

Penny explained that she is one of the lucky people who had a calling. Her mother tells her that even as the smallest kid in her class as a young girl, she was always the one defending everyone else. She also described some wonderful teachers who influenced her decisions along the way. One in particular saw her as having the talent and personality that would be well-suited for a career in journalism. While doing research for a story for her high school newspaper, she knocked on the door of a woman she was hoping to interview, who said to her, "You're a Sagittarius, aren't you?" It turns out that she is. She is an adventurous risk taker with a strong sense of social justice. This is the personality her teacher saw that would make her a successful journalist.

Penny attended Wellesley College and received a graduate degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. After a year spent teaching in Switzerland, her first "real" job was as a writer in Miami for a documentary unit with CBS. She also met her husband there - and stayed in Miami for over 33 years.

While freelancing after her daughter was born, Penny had the opportunity to work on her first book about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Her friend Flip Schulke, a former TimeLife photographer, had the definitive collection of photos on MLK and his family. He was interested in getting them published and finally found a publisher who would produce the book pro bono. In fact, no one involved in the publication made any money on the book. Penny's role was to write the cut lines explaining the context of the photos, and she recommended using Dr. King's own words to best convey the meaning of the images. Reading all of Dr. King's writing was life changing. The book, titled *Martin Luther King, Jr: A Documentary, Montgomery to Memphis*, was far more successful than expected.

As a result of that success, the publisher invited Penny and Flip to write a second book in honor of the newly designated King Holiday. For that book, called *King Remembered*, Penny had the opportunity to interview many of Dr. King's lieutenants, including Andy Young, Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, Fred Shuttlesworth, Julian Bond and Hosea Williams. She describes the interviews as an experience that was "beyond life changing."

In 1980, Penny was recruited to a new position as Director of Cultural Affairs at WPBT, the public television station in Miami. This was the moment when Miami began its ascension to the cultural center that is today. With this move, she made the shift from print journalism to television production, and ultimately realized it was a better fit.

About the time her daughter entered middle school, Penny decided she needed to stay home with her again working as an independent producer developing arts programming for the PBS station.

Another pivotal time occurred in 1990 when the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation moved to Miami – and, they were looking for a director of cultural affairs. Penny felt that the skill set was the same as that of being a producer – i.e., having and recognizing good ideas, putting pieces and people together, and writing. They ultimately hired her because she was a journalist. The foundation would go on to become a billion dollar foundation. Her work took her to 26 cities – but it was all fun. Her recommendation to others: "When you're considering a career change, don't look only at the job and your past experience. Look at your skill set and how it might fit a variety of roles."

In 2004, Penny was contacted by a search firm working on behalf of the Arthur Blank Family Foundation. Although she was not seeking a new position, the headhunter persuaded her to, "just talk to Arthur." She did and realized that he also grew up in the *Tikkun Olam* culture, and there was an immediate bond. With that, she decided to move to Atlanta to work for the Arthur Blank Family Foundation. Moving to Atlanta was a huge risk, but she immediately loved it. One thing she noticed here, she says, "The women are especially supportive of one another."

Arthur explained to Penny that he wants his entire family to be engaged in the work of the foundation. The foundation's programs span the family's interests from early childhood education, to youth development, to the arts and the environment. One of many areas of support of which the foundation is proud is helping to make the Atlanta Beltline a reality.

Mr. Blank also gives back through his businesses. Through the Falcons, he focuses on youth fitness and the prevention of childhood obesity. While other football franchises support this type of initiative, Mr. Blank puts more money in

the Atlanta Youth Foundation than any other team. He also owns a ranch in Montana, and 30% of profits go to environmental and youth charities in that state.

## Q&A

1. Can you describe the dynamics of being only non-Blank family trustee?
  - When becoming a part of a family foundation, you become a part of family. Penny explains that she had to figure out, “What do they need from me, and how can I be a resource to them while still letting them act as a family?”
  - She asked Arthur early on, “What will success look like?” He let her know that his family being engaged was half of what determined success.
2. How are the young Blanks being “groomed” and engaged?
  - One board meeting every year involves the younger children, and we also include them in volunteer activities and occasional site visits.
  - There is also a community event for the associates from all the businesses and the children participate.
  - As information for others, there’s a new online tool called GivingPoint.org, created by the same person that created Choice Point. It is designed for everyone’s use and allows you to give or create a project for others to give to.
3. How has your role changed in the down economy?
  - Her role has not changed, but her strategy has. Foundations are torn between services and advocacy for making change. With fewer grant dollars, it makes more sense to focus more on advocacy than on direct service delivery. However, the foundation’s advocacy is strengthened by being able to point to successful programs on the ground.
4. What is a foundation?
  - Foundations fall under the nonprofit area of the IRS. If you create a corpus and give away 5%, you do not pay taxes. It allows you to protect assets to give back to common good.
  - The argument is that foundations can do things government cannot – take more risks, be more inventive. Foundations are often called the venture capital of philanthropy.