

Bayer center director helps nonprofits realize dreams

Tuesday, May 04, 2010

By Joyce Gannon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Robin Rombach/Post-Gazette

Peggy Morrison Outon, executive director of the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at its offices in the Regional Enterprise Tower, Downtown.

Peggy Morrison Outon was raising funds for a new museum project at the University of New Orleans and teaching nonprofit management to graduate students when a headhunter called her unexpectedly in the fall of 1998 to describe a job being created at what was then Robert Morris College.

The Texas native had never heard of the school and had never visited Pittsburgh. But she was intrigued by the position: running a new center that would combine graduate education in nonprofit management with daily, professional support for nonprofits.

A few months later, she found herself spending the night in the Duquesne Club, Downtown, preparing for a breakfast meeting with 17 people, including representatives from the United Way, other large nonprofits and some local foundations.

When they asked her that morning how Pittsburgh area nonprofits could be better managed, she recalled saying, "San Francisco did this, and Dallas did that, but it has to fit for Pittsburgh."

Good answer. "It was almost like there was an audible click in the air ... and I was hired," said Ms. Outon. By the summer of 1999, she had bought a Victorian home on the North Side and, with her husband, relocated here to launch the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University.

The center, with an annual budget of about \$1 million, opened the following year and has provided consulting and programs for an estimated 3,000 nonprofits. Based in the Regional Enterprise Tower, it also collaborates with the university to offer a master's in nonprofit management to working professionals.

The project marks its 10th anniversary May 12 with a fundraiser and celebration at the August Wilson Center for African American Culture that will feature a specially commissioned performance by the Bricolage Production Co.

Q: What's the most important thing the center has accomplished in its decade of existence?

A: I think we have been a gathering place for people who want

PEGGY MORRISON OUTON

Job: Executive director, Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University.

Age: 60.

Hometown: Born in Fort Worth, Texas, raised in Dallas; resides on the North Side.

Education: Bachelor's degree, drama and government, University of Texas at Austin, 1973.

Career: 1977-85: Various positions at Austin Museum of Art including volunteer coordinator, special events, managing museum store, writing proposals; 1985-89: director, Center for Nonprofit Management, Austin; 1989-93: director of development, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans; 1993-97: director, Center for Effective Nonprofit Management, New Orleans; 1997-99: associate director, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, University of New Orleans; 1999-present: executive director, Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert

A: I think we have been a gathering place for people who want to see their nonprofit be the absolute best it can be. People bring their hopes and dreams in their hands, and we're supposed to make it practical. And infuse a dose of reality into that conversation, but be very respectful of their initiative and their bravery.

Morris University.

We have a strong belief in dialogue and we are interested in what they know. We do not presume to know what they know. We've added to the knowledge base through our wage and benefit studies [surveys on compensation for nonprofit professionals]; our study of the use of technology by nonprofits; and economic impact studies on how the recession has affected nonprofits.

Q: How have nonprofits fared since 9/11 and during the recent recession?

A: When the foundations' fortunes ebb, as they did after 9/11 and in this recession, it sends a shockwave of fear through the nonprofit sector.

Boy, after 9/11 people were just paralyzed in some cases with fear because they didn't know if they were going to continue to exist.

In this current recession, it's been interesting. Of course the [2009] state budget debacle -- the 101 days without a budget -- was just awful for human service agencies. They had to borrow money, and now they're having to figure out how to pay back the interest because that didn't come when the money was released.

There are definitely some that are not going to weather this storm because working with such a thin margin, there was not room for grace. But people in nonprofits are just spunky and determined ... so they're figuring out how to do their work and get their people taken care of in spite of the fear and in some cases the reduced funds.

Q: What specific services do you offer to nonprofits?

A: We are the only nonprofit that offers training to apply technology -- information management and equipment -- to nonprofit management.

Our training on fundraising is very popular. And we have training on financial management, public relations, marketing, websites.

We have about 150 volunteers who offer their expertise -- from leaders of the Grable, Heinz Endowments, Bayer and Hillman foundations -- to lawyers, accountants and marketing professionals.

We even have stress-reduction training for nonprofit people so they learn to relax and don't keel over When there's an issue in nonprofits, we go out and find the best person to teach it.

Q: How are you funded?

A: Of our \$1 million budget, we earn about 55 percent ... through fees for services. We actually are a social venture. The rest comes from philanthropic and university support.

Q: Why is Bayer's name on the center?

A: The initial funding came from the Richard King Mellon Foundation. [It remains] our biggest funder and biggest single donor. The Bayer Foundation offered to support us, and the Mellon Foundation didn't want naming rights ... so we're very proud to bear the Bayer name.

Q: How big is your staff?

A: We have nine employees. We live the nonprofit life. We get what it's like to have big ideas and big dreams, and not so many hands to do the work. We leverage ourselves through all our volunteers.

Q: Describe your management style.

A: I like dreams. I am patient with chaos. I like to start stuff.

I hire really smart people -- ideally, smarter than me. I let them work. I'm very interested in other people's ideas.

[Our staff] has their own projects and responsibilities and their own revenue goals, and are expected to achieve, and they do. I think that's pretty female, actually. I was a mother of young children and working when they were young. You learn to kind of assess who's OK and let them go and who you need to spend time with That has somewhat translated into work here.

Q: What do you want the center to accomplish in the future?

A: We're having conversations with women who are young professionals and don't necessarily want to grow up and be executive directors of nonprofits because they see those jobs as punishing and difficult. In many ways, the nonprofit sector is a creature of the baby boomer generation. So, OK, what happens next?

We need to be about encouraging younger professionals to see the excitement in leading nonprofits. We're convening small groups of women to talk about the barriers to promotion. Our wage and benefit study has charted a persistent and pervasive wage gap between women and men in nonprofits: We're at 72 cents on the dollar for women.

So how do we make women stronger and more capable in nonprofit organizations? We're trying to devise some solutions. ... I'm hoping to get some funding. It's really a three-year project that would culminate in a big symposium. I'd like to get Michelle Obama here. Why not?

Also, we're interested in making sure nonprofits can compete with bookkeeping and management. You can't compete if you can't play with technology or have an understanding of how a budget is built. ... They may have to use debt, which nonprofits used to do not at all.

And they can't compete if they're not visible. How do you market when you have almost no money? We'll help people use the Web and new things that are affordable yet effective.

We just want to be there. I think we have gotten our greatest joys by walking beside our clients, by having a sense of their courage and their ambitions, their aspirations and their hopes. I hope to keep walking beside people who are trying to make things happen in the world that we need.

Joyce Gannon: jgannon@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1580.

"Money Q&A" and "Company Town" are featured exclusively at [PG+](#), a members-only web site of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our [introduction to PG+](#) gives you all the details.



First published on May 4, 2010 at 12:00 am