

# GIVING SPIRIT

Melinda Gates

IT IS EARLY MORNING IN SEATTLE and several hundred teachers from across the United States are gathered in a hotel ballroom for the Elevating and Celebrating Effective Teaching and Teachers conference (ECET<sup>2</sup>). That's an acronymic mouthful, but this morning's surprise guest is Melinda Gates, and as she arrives on stage the teachers rise together and cheer like sports fans. From the back of the room I can see hundreds of tiny images of Melinda illuminated in the cellphone and tablet screens that rush photos off to social media channels everywhere. We're caught up in a star sighting: She's here, and she's real.

The ensuing conversation on stage is personal between Melinda and Vicki Phillips, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation director of college-ready education. Wearing a Caribbean-blue dress and wedge sandals, hair draped over her shoulders in her signature style, Melinda keeps her hands in constant motion, like a conductor—guiding and expressing, not fidgeting. Her ease, informality and candor make us all feel like we're just old friends catching up.

Phillips leads discussion of the foundation's work in education, but Melinda also shares stories about her family and her own education. She loved her computer science program in school, she tells us,

By Kristianne Huntsberger



"All lives have equal value."

—Melinda Gates



GIVING SPIRIT



Melinda Gates listens to a presentation at the Marie Stopes International clinic in Dakar, Senegal.



GIVING SPIRIT



Teachers attending a July 2015 conference in Seattle offer Melinda Gates their feedback on improving the American education system.

but the art history and literature classes are the ones she remembers most. Books were always important to her and even played a charming role in her courtship with her husband, Bill Gates, who told her on an early date that *The Great Gatsby* was his favorite book and wanted to know not only if she'd read it, but whether she would read it again.

"Well, I've read it three times," she told him, "but I'll read it again if you want."

The crowd chuckles. We feel closer to the famously private couple on hearing that they connected over books and that each time they traveled together they picked a book to share. They shared their love of literature with their three children, and Melinda said it gave her opportunities to read Lois

**"If [you] go in and give three hours ... that makes a difference."**

Lowry's *The Giver* aloud with her son and to pick up John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* at the recommendation of her daughters.

Melinda's openness about her family makes the gathering of hundreds feel intimate. And her encouragement of the ECET<sup>2</sup> teachers' ability to transform American education feels equally personal. The Gates Foundation likes to call community leaders change agents, and it labels its approach to

change "going upstream"—that is, getting close to the source of a problem. Melinda commends the teachers in the room for playing that role in children's lives. Teachers are the experts who should be asked frequently how to help students, she explains: "You know what needs to be done in the classroom."

The room fills again with cheering, and the crowd looks honored. Later, as

Melinda waits in the restroom line with us, teachers share their book recommendations for her and Bill and the kids. She listens cheerfully to them all, smiles at tidbits of advice.

Because I live in Seattle, I've naturally followed the Gates Foundation over the past 15 years. Some of my friends got jobs there on fascinating projects around the world, and I watched the headquarters rise between the Space Needle and Highway 99. But it all seemed rather distant, geographically and metaphorically, and I didn't start truly noticing the foundation's work until Melinda stepped up in 2012 to advocate for women and girls. I'd just returned home after a few years living and teaching in Myanmar, where my female students were removed from class for their arranged marriages, and my friend in her early 30s explained that since she'd had three children and wasn't able to support more, a hysterectomy was her only option. Melinda Gates' new family planning mission resonated with me, as for millions of women.

Melinda's urge to serve her community started near the upstream headwaters of her own life. As a young student at a Catholic girls school in Texas, Dallas' Ursuline Academy, the school motto, *Serviam* (I will serve), was taken seriously. Melinda volunteered at the local hospital, at local public schools and at the Dallas county courthouse. The experience convinced her that one person can change the world—or a part of it anyway. Her math teacher, Mrs. Bauer, who was raising her three sons alone and taking night classes to get her Ph.D. in computer science, particularly motivated Melinda.

Mrs. Bauer brought computers into the school and into Melinda's life and encouraged the girls to



## Making a Difference

Each of us can contribute in all kinds of ways.

Melinda Gates suggests getting involved in your own community. Food banks and shelters always need volunteers to make sandwiches or transport food. You can donate things you think would be useful to a family in transition or maybe give a few hours of your day to a local organization. "Just get out in the community and see all these amazing organizations that do their work, and you'll realize: OK, if I go in and give three hours of my time, that makes a difference," Melinda urges. "And you start to meet people who are in the community who aren't in circumstances that you're in, and you get drawn in by them and their stories."

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Meeting with mothers in a village in India.

their children. Observing intentional practices such as family dinner-time proved crucial: Melinda and Bill kept track of their schedules

not only learn from her as a teacher, but to surpass her. Melinda was inspired to pursue a bachelor's degree in computer science, followed by an MBA, both at Duke; and, ultimately, to start her career at the then-fledgling Microsoft company. Clearly, neither Mrs. Bauer nor Melinda could know that the company would become a global corporate titan; that she'd meet and marry its cofounder, one of the world's wealthiest individuals; that together they would create a \$44 billion philanthropy, the world's wealthiest private foundation.

Melinda's devotion to serving has channeled the significant fortune she and her husband Bill share toward helping some of the most disadvantaged people in the world. The couple started the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2000 to advance their belief that "all lives have equal value. And we're very serious about that," she adds. "All lives, anywhere on the planet." At the beginning, Melinda felt most comfortable behind the scenes, especially wanting to maintain some privacy for her children. She and Bill traveled frequently for the foundation, but she didn't want that to interfere with their relationships with

to ensure one parent was always home to share the evening meal with the children. They banned reading and electronic devices from the table, and focused on inclusive conversation.

Task equality was also important, Melinda explains, so cleanup was a group job: "Nobody leaves the kitchen until Mom leaves the kitchen."

It was almost a decade before she herself left the foundation's kitchen, metaphorically. By 2012, when Melinda delivered her now-famous keynote address to the London Family Planning Summit and set an outspoken course for the foundation to help answer the needs of women and girls around the world, she was prepared to take a more public role. She'd spent years making room for her family to keep its anonymity but, she recalls, she was also asking herself: "Am I role modeling for my daughters? If I'm telling my daughter to use her voice in the world, to stand up and be a strong woman, am I doing that myself?"

Today, Melinda Gates is a role model to more than just her own daughters; she's an inspiration to women and girls across the world—and, let's assume, to millions of men as well. For the past

**"Nobody leaves the kitchen until Mom leaves the kitchen."**



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A retreat offering recovery support for low-income and homeless Washington state adults in need of substance abuse treatment. [recoverycafe.org](http://recoverycafe.org)

**Eastside Baby Corner**

Over 100 people, ages 7 and up, volunteer with weekly community drives for baby goods to support families who are rebuilding their lives in King County, Washington. [babycorner.org](http://babycorner.org)

**Hopelink**

Ongoing volunteer opportunities are available to assist with food banks, donation pickups and deliveries, moving assistance, adult education and child care for low-income and homeless families, seniors and people with disabilities in King County. [hope-link.org](http://hope-link.org)

**Nothing But Nets**

A global campaign to try to eradicate malaria. Contributions as small as

\$10 help provide long-lasting, treated bed nets to communities in need around the world. [nothingbutnets.net](http://nothingbutnets.net)

**DonorsChoose.org**

A way to help alleviate the prevailing educational disparity in the United States. Give as little as \$1 and you can then choose where the funding goes, whether it is toward needed books, technology, supplies or field trips. [donorschoose.org](http://donorschoose.org)

**Boys & Girls Clubs**

Donate or volunteer time and support young men and women who need safe places to learn and grow. [bgca.org](http://bgca.org)

**Global Citizen**

The Global Citizen community is a virtual platform supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Here you can learn about the world's most significant challenges, get involved and spread the word. [globalcitizen.org](http://globalcitizen.org)

three years she has been dubbed third among the 100 Most Powerful Women, named annually by *Forbes*. Her 2015 placement rests just behind German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton.

## “You have to take bold steps.”

Looking directly to teachers for solutions is a way of going upstream and working at a point closest to an issue. Melinda seeks this upstream approach across the 27 diverse program strategies at the Gates Foundation, which range from eradicating dread diseases through universal vaccination, to empowering women and girls by

broadening access to contraceptives.

Like the offices on every floor at downtown Seattle’s Gates Foundation headquarters, Melinda’s is bright with light from the many windows. Foundation team members, who frequently travel across the globe, benefit from natural light to help alleviate jet lag. Melinda’s windows look out over the fishing net sculpture, *Impatient Optimist*, created for the campus by Janet Echelman. The nets, suspended from the tops of the surrounding buildings, billow and breathe like airy jellyfish. Patterns of daylight, recorded from the many worldwide locations where the foundation works, are projected on the sculpture to unite the locations together in a centralized form.

Melinda and Bill Gates have frequently called themselves impatient optimists. When I sit down with her in her office, I ask Melinda how she maintains optimism when faced with some of the world’s tough-

est problems. Finding meditative moments to be still, she explains. Even despite her busy schedule: Amid foundation strategy reviews, meetings with program presidents, learning sessions with experts, and a dozen annual trips to meet grantees, beneficiaries and leaders around the world, she makes time to reflect on the results of the work. She savors the positive changes she can see, like Nigeria marking its momentous first polio-free year this past summer. She also focuses on the change that remains possible, such as the proven benefits for communities when women are given greater value. “If a girl is educated,” Melinda explains, “she’s twice as likely to educate her daughter. The way she interacts with the health system changes significantly if she’s educated. And when a woman gets an extra dollar in her hands, 90 percent goes to her family. That sort of information helps me stay optimistic.”

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Melinda brings to the Gates Foundation a highly tuned radar for data and efficiency—in person, when numbers come up she gets a gleam in her eyes and it's easy to remember she's a computer scientist. She believes it is important to help, but essential to know that the help is actually effective. When they were first envisioning the foundation, Melinda and Bill approached the endeavor with careful thought. "We totally believe in innovation and so when we looked around, we asked what organizations are really moving things in a huge way for the poor through innovation? We found some smaller organizations, but we didn't see anybody doing it to the scale we thought we wanted to do. That meant we needed a very hands-on approach, so we could live out our belief in our mission statement." Each year the couple participates in rigorous foundation-wide strategy reviews to focus and implement more efficient approaches. Good philanthropy, Melinda believes, involves collecting and comparing both personal experience and empirical data. "It's on the ground that I go and meet people and make the connections. You see the needs and you see where the gaps are, but then you see what's possible."

The upstream approach was an important lesson taken from the failure of their early Sound Families Initiative, which didn't solve the problem it was intended to. The houses that were built didn't stop families from becoming homeless, so the foundation learned to look upstream and develop assistance for families on the verge of homelessness, rather than treating the symptoms too late. Another valuable lesson she said they learned involves delivery. The focus on innovation created great resources, but without the efforts upstream within communities, the resources couldn't help. "You can have the best vaccine or polio drops," she explains, "but if the mother won't accept the polio drops in her child's mouth or the father won't

accept the vaccine, that great piece of medical science isn't going to help a child." Focusing on delivery, getting personal and working closely with communities at the source of an issue have become keys to the foundation's work.

As the foundation began looking upstream, Melinda noticed a significant factor that was personally meaningful to her. The root of many problems was the fact that women and girls were missing from the conversation. The research was clear: When women are educated and make family decisions, the entire community prospers. Melinda saw it face-to-face on her travels, and saw it reflected in the data. What she didn't see was global advocacy for key issues that women ask for, such as family planning. Eventually, despite her inclination to stay behind the scenes, she decided the improved health and agency of women deserves a voice on the global stage. The stories and data matched, which was the conjunction the Gates Foundation had learned makes change most valuable and most possible. "We raised \$2.3 billion for contraceptives to give 120 million women voluntary access by 2020," Melinda explains. "We put it back on the global health agenda; we're making our way toward our goal, measuring very closely."

The foundation built its own data using networks of women in communities interviewing other women about their needs.

"In fact 220 million women are saying they want to have access to contraceptives," Melinda points out. "We weren't doing anything because of controversy in our own country. And there was extremely little research being done in the area of family planning on behalf of women. I was thinking, this is so important for women: It saves their lives, it saves babies' lives. And I couldn't find an advocate. So—you have to take bold steps. If you really want something to change in the world, you have to be willing to show leadership, even when it's

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bold, even when it's uncomfortable, but it's the right thing to do."

As a global role model, Melinda has a voice that's valuable, but she's not one to sit back and use speaking points; her goal is action, "getting women and girls the tools or the education or the peace they need to lift themselves up." She emphasizes, "It's not about the West coming in and doing, it's

about [the women]—the access they need, or the tools or education." It is also about investment, which is where Melinda has used her voice most. The foundation is contributing significantly to develop new health, education and business tools for women, but Melinda knows funding for something as transformative as lifting the social presence of women around the world

requires more than just the Gates Foundation. It needs the global community to make direct investments that declare the value of women and girls.

In her own youth Melinda had strong models who helped show her she had value; those foundational experiences led her to where she is today.

"So how do we make sure we empower women and girls today? I'm particularly interested in how do we get more girls to go into STEM fields? I graduated at a time when we thought computer science for women was on the rise; but it turns out when I was in college it was at its peak and now we're down to 18 percent female computer science graduates. That makes absolutely no sense. ... But I'm still optimistic."

It does not require a fortune to change the world; we all can help (see page 47). And there is no small part to play. The 2014 World Giving Index ranked the United States and Myanmar as tied at No. 1 for philanthropy. Yes, one of the world's least developed countries, the nation where my girl students were taken from class for arranged marriages; and one of the world's wealthiest countries, home of the world's biggest private foundation, created by the marriage of two computer virtuosos.

Melinda feels the foundation, like a healthy ecosystem, needs a complex network of partners to thrive. Whenever she speaks to groups, whether homelessness service providers or policy leaders, she emphasizes that the work wouldn't succeed without its many partners. With that network, I ask, can the Gates Foundation change the world? She smiles and says yes, she thinks it can.

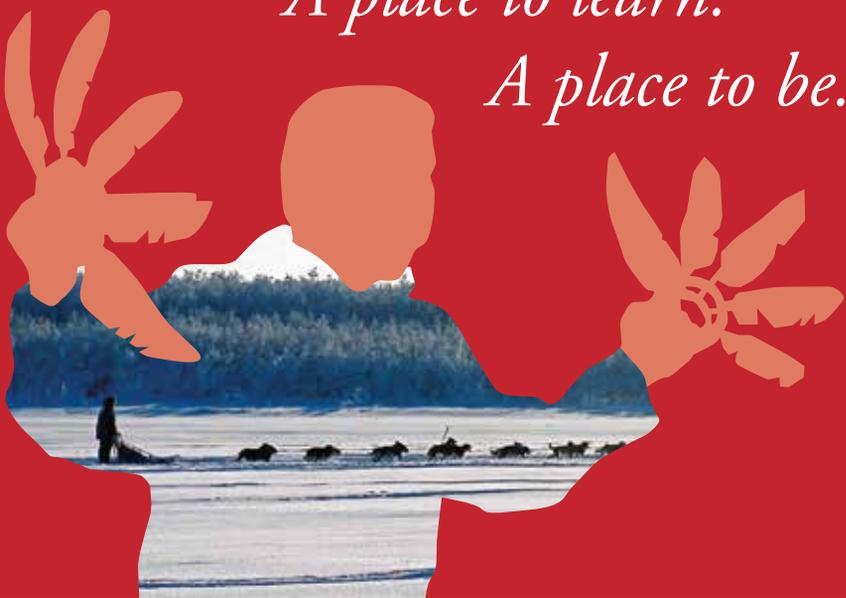
Melinda Gates may be just one person—an exceptional one, true—but she'd like to belong to a very large club of change agents.

"Let's not be afraid to fail. In fact, let's be afraid to not try." ▲

*Kristianne Huntsberger is based in Seattle.*

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