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SHARING HER SUCCESS

MILLIONAIRE TURNS TO PHILANTHROPY

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Page: 9 Section: North Weekly



Like most kids living in the Somerville housing projects, Elizabeth Weber wanted out. She had no game plan, no clue how to even get started. Like most people, she had no idea what she wanted to be when she grew up. "All I knew was I wanted to be a millionaire," she said.

When you realize your life's dream at the age of 44, what do you do next? "You give it all back," said Weber, who today is indeed a millionaire. "Or at least a lot of it." And so she has.

On one of the biggest nights of her life, celebrating her 20th wedding anniversary in the Hub's Bay Tower Room with some 100 of her friends, several of whom she had put on their own fast track to wealth, Weber announced the formation of an organization that defined what she had become - a philanthropist.

It was that night, 16 months ago, that the Melrose-based Weber Foundation of Helping Hands began its work to raise money for people who need it a lot more than she does. To date, the foundation has raised more than \$100,000 and given all of it to 18 people, most of them New Englanders, who have life-threatening illnesses or other catastrophic situations.

Among the recipients are Kelly Conlon, a Stoneham High School student who needs a double lung transplant; the families of Ed and Carol Conley of Wilmington and Joseph Phillion of Melrose, whose homes were destroyed by fires; and 3-year-old Bobby Terri of Norwood and Kimberly Mackay of Winthrop, who have brain tumors. The organization's first recipient was 3-year-old Robbie Sorrentino of Burlington, who died last year after battling leukemia.

"Ms. Weber is a genuinely nice person. and she's got a lot of great ideas," said Conlon, who since she was a small child has suffered from primary pulmonary hypertension. Now a 15-year-old sophomore, Conlon tries to keep up with her school work by using a computer from home when she's not in school two days a week. "The foundation is great because it's not just meant to help with one thing; it's pretty much able to help anyone who needs them. I think it's great that [the foundation] is willing to do stuff for lots of other people and not just focus on one thing, because there are so many things that can happen and can get forgotten."

In a letter sent to Weber shortly after her son died, Terry Sorrentino wrote: "We are so grateful for the help you gave to us and our son. You are truly amazing and really make a difference in people's lives. Families that are sick or in trouble are so very lucky to have the help from the Foundation." So far, she said, Helping Hands has been able to give away nearly every dime of the funds it has raised because all of the administrative expenses, which are considerable, have been donated by generous friends and suppliers or paid for by Weber. Those include legal work, printing, photography, and the daily efforts of a team of volunteers.

The foundation plans two major fund-raising events each year. The big one is a spring ball, which this year will be held April 6 at the Fairmount Copley Plaza in Boston. Weber's sphere of influence is evident in the items that have been donated for the ball's silent auction: helicopter rides, framed art, diamond bracelets,

golf at the Newport Country Club, and vacations on Block Island and in Puerto Vallarta. It's all pretty heady stuff for Weber, a mother of two children who has not yet completed her bachelor of arts degree. But, in the past two decades, Weber has gone from selling brushes door-to-door to becoming international field president for Market America, earning more than seven figures a year.

After graduating from Somerville High School in 1975, Weber pursued a business administration degree, first at Massachusetts Bay Community College, then at Suffolk University, Bentley College, and Northeastern University. "I was so close to finishing," Weber said. "But I wasn't cut out for the classroom."

So she left school and went to work as a secretary for the Boston law firm of Reed, McCarthy, and Mulligan, leaving seven years later with Joe Mulligan when he became general counsel for the City of Boston. Weber managed to hang in there for 10 years before stagnation set in. "I was always looking to get ahead, and I knew I had to try something," she said.

She tried a lot of things - most of them ventures in distributed sales programs. "I tried everything - brushes, jewelry, skin care - you name it. I made some money, but it wasn't worth the hours I was putting in. I wanted to make it big, and I wasn't getting to the six figures I wanted to make. I was with nine different direct-selling companies in 11 years. My husband Bruce and I were living paycheck to paycheck. It was so hard. I was ready to give up."

That's when a friend asked her to check out a new company called Market America, which used a different approach from the other companies she had tried. "Bruce and I promised each other we wouldn't try another thing," she said. "I was only going to evaluate it. When I did, I realized how radically different it was from anything else I tried. I'd been in this long enough to know."

Within a year, she had reached her goal of a six-figure salary, and within two years, Weber was making \$8,300 a week, recruiting teams of distributors who were selling a wide variety of products, including house alarms, water filters, and nutritional supplements. Four years later she earned her first \$1 million.

According to friends and family, it all makes sense when you understand her personality. "Betty is the most driven person I know," said longtime friend Connie Spellman of Stoneham. "She's a real Type-A, a real go-getter. When she sets her mind to something, it gets done. And that's it."

"That's true" Weber admitted. "I love a challenge. I have always been determined to be successful, somehow. There's been a lot of hard work and a lot of good fortune, too. I have a wonderful family who has been so supportive over the years, especially during the tough times when you need them the most. And I have met an awful lot of very good people who want me to succeed. That's been the key for me - the people who have been there for me. So, now it's my turn to give."

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