***From Mentored to Mentor***

***Investing in Women to Build a Greater Future***

Jan Pruitt, North Texas Food Bank

If only we came fully formed…

you know, ***fully*** formed – ready to tackle every challenge, with the right amount of wisdom, and the right work ethic, and the right one-on-one skills. No mistakes. Nothing left undone; nothing done badly; nothing falling through the cracks.

***If only…..***

Have you ever looked at the people around you? I’m talking about a careful look? Here’s what you see – a lot of folks who are not yet what they could be – not yet fully formed. And so many women around you are just waiting to burst out into their fully formed self – their next, more productive, more life-shaping chapter of their own.

I look at the women we hire at the North Texas Food Bank. Before you know it, some of them start to shine. It’s **that one** -- just about ready to shine -- that we need to be on the look out for. **Find that one**… **select that one…** **mentor that one**. And, then… watch the magic!

You know, the Food Bank is one place where such magic can happen, because it provides such a rich cross section of the entire human journey. We see people at the bottom of Maslow’s famous hierarchy, deprived of their basic needs. Our mission addresses this: The ***North Texas Food Bank passionately pursues a hunger-free community.***

But then, we see plenty of folks who are living at the upper portions of Maslow -- ready to serve our community in a way that makes a difference, in a way that meets the needs of those further down on the hierarchy. These people, so many of them women, seek, and develop, greater self-esteem -- and they find it either working for, or volunteering for, our organization.

You might say ***they have to learn***

So that

They can ***live out their destiny***

So that

The next generation can see, and build on, **their legacy.**

**Here it is again:**

**They have to learn, and then live, and then leave their legacy…**

These women we see, these women not yet fully formed -- the women all around you -- have so very much to offer. Their hearts are big, their eyes wide open to the human need, and the human capabilities, around them.

And as they build their own capabilities, they are about to be unleashed on the people in their corner of the world – where they will do **so much good** for other people…

***If… If…***

A number of years ago, there was a young woman ready to take a next step – a bigger step – but, to be honest, she did not know that yet. She started out an energetic volunteer, doing what she could. And then, she rose to lead, as the Executive Director of a small nonprofit. Notice the key word – “small” nonprofit.

This was a place that provided food to people in need. And there was this older woman… **Grannie Wheat**, who had kind of made it her life work to be on the lookout for women with promise. She had a good eye, and a knack for inserting herself in just the right way – for saying the very words that could lift the vision and the self-confidence of the women she singled out. She *networked* before the word had been invented… And she could… well, it was as though she had self-confidence in **“your”** ability… If a woman was lacking in self-confidence (and many, many women are), she had enough extra to just fill that woman up to overflowing. It was like she was a miracle worker.

The word mentor may not have yet made it fully into our vocabulary – but trust me, **Grannie Wheat** was a mentor par excellence.

And that one particular woman **Grannie Wheat** mentored? Well, she’s speaking to you right now. Without **Grannie Wheat**, I would still be the Director of a small nonprofit. Doing some good, for sure … but not as much good, not as much as I could have done. Not as much good as I was meant to do.

I learned on my own to say yes to a challenge, when I was asked to lead the small nonprofit. And then, **Grannie Wheat** helped me say yes to something greater.

Here is something I know… A woman can provide a challenge. I guarantee I did…

In one breath, I said:

*“Please mentor me,”*

and in the next breath, I said,

*“but, I didn't really want you to point out my flaws, my deficiencies quite that bluntly… Do I really have that far to go?”*

**Well, we all had that far to go, didn't we?** But our mentors listened well to us – to our doubts, our objections, our fears -- and then knew exactly the right way to ignore them all, and keep pushing us to be more than we thought we could be. Because…

**A good mentor is** this great combination of *loving*, ***and*** *stern*, mother.

**A good mentor is** absolutely intent on being a model worthy of following.

**A good mentor is** always a fellow learner – even learning from the women she mentors.

Let’s stop a minute. Look around you -- look at the women at your table. Now look across the room. We have some 200 women in this room. Yes, one exemplar will be the **“Mentor of the Year.”** But to that woman you mentor– **you** are *their* **mentor of the year**.

You are all being honored because you have this gift, this commitment, this life purpose to bring out the best in others. Because every woman who is earlier in her journey than you are in yours is ready to burst out. To go just a little higher.

You see that in her. You are a ***WOVI Woman – a Woman of Visionary Influence – a WOVI Woman.***  You have vision -- You have vision for what that yet unformed woman can become – and you are willing to invest your time, your heart – your very soul -- to influence her in the right direction.

Spotting the potential – infusing hope and promise and self-confidence into another woman – that’s what mentoring is.

**Mentoring is believing that people not yet fully formed can become more -- more than they are right now.** A **well-mentored woman** becomes…

 • **more** productive

 • **more** successful

 • **more** influential

 • **more**… far-reaching in their impact.

**Mentoring is investing time -- actual, consistent time -- in those with great promise.**

**A mentor says – You can do this next thing – I’m here to teach, and cajole, and challenge… and believe in you, even at times when you are not yet ready to believe in yourself…. Now, go for it!**

Ok – that’s me talking. Here’s the *Book* definition:

***Mentorship*** *is a personal developmental relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. However, true mentoring is more than just answering occasional questions or providing ad hoc help. It is about an ongoing relationship of learning, dialogue, and challenge.*

*"Mentoring" is a* ***process*** *– a* ***process*** *that always involves communication and is relationship based, although its precise definition is elusive.*

And one more:

*a mentor acts*

*as* ***Advisor*** *–*

*And* ***Counselor*** *–*

*And* ***Guide***

*providing* ***Feedback***

*Lots and lots of* ***Feedback***

Which means

Paying attention – and always being attentive.

So – let’s look at the “formula” for mentoring. You have to have **a willing learner**; plus **an insightful teacher -- the mentor in the relationship**. They have to get together – both willing to enter into this learning relationship. And they each have to commit to make this a “regular” interaction – one scheduled in the calendar, on purpose, with consistency. An **“appointment to learn”** and **“an appointment to teach”** -- that must not be easily broken.

A mentor knows that her most precious gift is her time, -- and she says,

*“I’m going to give you a chunk of my time -- because you are not yet fully formed. But when you are, it is going to be a wonder to behold. And I think I can help you get there. And I think the very best use of my time right now is to invest it in you.”*

**To put it another way… mentoring is humbly paying it forward.**

And the key word is “humbly.” This one is important. You know, it sounds so arrogant to say *“I’m going to give you part of my heart, and time, and help you achieve more.”*  It almost sounds like *“without me, you can't reach your goals.”* It ***sounds*** arrogant, but it isn’t. What it really indicates is a genuine humility that pays it forward.

A recent study of successful mentors noted this: successful people are not reluctant to seek out help. They are willing to spot that person who can help, and then say:

*“I need help in these ways. Will you help me?”*

Successful women are **“Mentor Hunters” (ok – “Mentor Gatherers”)** – they go in search of people who can help them develop and grow.

The difference between ***successful*** people and other people with talent is that the successful ones were not hesitant to ask for help. They were **eager to learn** from others. And the women they learn from? These are their mentors.

Let me talk just a minute about the brave new world we live in – this world where strong voices are asking women to ***lean in***, to build that better future for all women. Today’s sharp young woman may know so much more than the not-so-young among us – about technology, and software… they may be more trained in the ***STEM*** arena: *science, technology, engineering, math*…

But, they are still young women. And those of us who have been around the block a time or two – who ***have*** learned to ***lean in***, at times against some pretty formidable odds, have come to understand this: **there is always the next new thing to learn.** And even as a woman masters the technology, or the latest process improvement, it is those ***“soft skills”*** -- those “emotional intelligence” traits -- that really matter. And, those traits have to be ***modeled***, and ***coached*** and ***taught***… Those traits need to be ***“mentored”*** – *demonstrated*, and *taught*, by a good mentor.

And it really does not matter what arena, what kind of organization, a woman works for. The need crosses all arenas. Each kind of organization needs women to develop, to become ever more effective. And to accomplish this, these women will need help from those who have already accomplished much. So, these women *need* a **teaching, encouraging mentor**.

And of all the things we have to teach maybe the most important is this – “***You have to become an accomplished life-long learner.*** *You did not master it all in college – there is always the next new thing to learn.”*

Business Guru Peter Drucker put it this way **“We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn.”** The only “job security” we have today is our own ability to learn. And a young woman looking for a mentor says, ***“Teach me what to learn. And, teach me how to keep learning.”***  When a woman is that hungry to learn… well, now we’ve got something to work with…

**So, a Good Mentor make two critical assumptions:**

#1 – They just assume that people want to develop in the direction of the good  -- and to keep developing. They assume ***women want to learn!***

And, #2 –they just assume that a lot of people want to help others develop in that direction of the good. They assume ***women want to teach – to mentor others.***

In other words, a good mentor assumes that **every person they meet wants to *be mentored*, and then later wants to *become* a mentor.**

With a pool this large, the influence for good spreads far and wide.

I believe that there is not a mentor in this room, there is not a mentor on this planet, that did not first have someone say to them – *“I believe in you, I’m ready to help you grow and develop and flourish and then have an impact on others.”*

Back to the women in this room. How many women are actually represented here?

Let’s think in terms of **Mentor Generations…**

Imagine that we have *iPad super powers*. That we can take our fingers, and spread them out, and to make these rings of women bigger with a motion of our hands. Here’s what we could do.

We could start with one ring – today’s ring – **you**! These are the women being honored for their accomplishments as mentors. Let’s call the women here today **Generation #2.**

But, now, let’s spread it out – make the ring bigger. Now, each woman in the ring is **reaching “back”** to **Generation #1** – the women that mentored them

And then, a little bigger… Let’s **reach forward** to **Generation #3** -- the women you have **already** mentored.

Now, let’s **reach even further forward** – to the next generation – **Generation #4**. The very women you mentored will soon be helping to shape and form the next ring.

You get the idea. If we could imagine such a picture, if we could **reach back**, and then **reach forward**, to “see” the ever-spreading influence of each woman in this room, *The Cowboy’s Domed Stadium* could not hold the rings of women – the ***WOVI*** women – ready to spread their influence far and wide.…

Each one of **you** – you honored mentors -- have been *parented*, and *taught*, and *supervised*, and *coached*, and *mentored*, and *sponsored*.

You are the willing, humble recipient of so much poured into you by others. -- **You have learned!**

And now, **you** are the willing, challenging mentor of the women you have selected -- **You are living the life of pay-it-forward influence.**

It was **28 years ago** when **Grannie Wheat** first mentored me. ***Where would I be without my Grannie Wheat?!!***

So, let’s imagine this exact same gathering in the year 2041 -- **28 years forward**. Some other speaker will be honoring a room full of life-changing, organization-shaping mentors. And some of those women will be pointing back to you – and during lunch, will say, I remember when Jane or Maria or \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ first called me aside, and said, *“I believe in you. You are going to make a difference, for so many, for the good of so many others.”*

You and your work will be remembered with reverence and appreciation and gratitude -- **You will have left a rich legacy.**

You are all just like **Grannie Wheat**. Oh, you may have more formal education, more sophisticated approaches, with all of your modern organizational structures and technological tools, but you know your job – it is to spot that as yet ***unformed*** woman, **that one** with so much promise. To say: *“I remember what I learned from the people who helped me. Now it’s my turn -- I can help you.”*

***That’s what we do. That’s what a WOVI woman does. We help other women become more -- that more fully formed version of themselves.*** Without us, they could not become what they could. With us… they’ve got a much greater shot at reaching for their stars.

So, thank you for saying yes to first being mentored. Thank you for saying yes to that inner voice beckoning you to mentor others.

I know you will keep at it. I surely will. The women we lead and shape – the women we ***mentor*** -- need us to succeed at this task. As do our organizations. As does our country – and our world.

And so, we will succeed.

James Baldwin once said:

***“Your crown has been bought and paid for.***

***All you have to do is put it on your head.”***

Your assignment is always right in front of your eyes. All you have to do is put the mantle on, and keep right on mentoring others.

And, because I know you will do exactly that, I simply say – ***I cannot wait to see what this room of accomplished women will do next…***

Thank you.