
Founding the United Way Women's Leadership Council of Southeast Louisiana: From the Women's Funding Movement to the United Way Today

Tanya Chen
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana,
USA



Abstract: The establishment of Women's Leadership Councils within the United Way of America and the subsequent development of the United Way Women's Leadership Council of Southeast Louisiana (UWSELA WLC) responded to the Women's Funding Movement and the increased involvement of women in professional philanthropy work. The community of women in philanthropy continues to grow and remains connected as it moves forward in further promoting women in professional charity and philanthropy work. The United Way of Southeast Louisiana develops its projects and goals to address local and community issues while adhering to the United Way's philanthropic Common Good goals. This case study explores the history, founding, motives, and practice of the UWSELA WLC as well as the process of selecting which issues to direct focus and resources toward.

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In 2002, Kim Sport founded the United Way of Southeast Louisiana's Women's Leadership Council (UWSELA WLC). Sport had volunteered with her husband at the United Way of Southeast Louisiana for many years and had never considered the possibility of separate council for women's work within the organization. Then, while serving as the chair of a \$20 million fundraising campaign in 2000, Sport became more conscious of gender's role in the United Way. "A woman had never chaired a United Way campaign in eighty years of history," Sport explained. Yet Sport was not the only woman to recognize gender inequality in the organization. "Other United Ways across the country were facing situations where women felt like their concerns were not being met by United Way boards that were dominated by males." These "concerns" resulted in a national movement to form a separate United Way organization known as the "Women's Way."

Ultimately, the Women's Way initiative failed since it called for "an extraordinary strain on limited resources." So, Sport and leaders from twelve other cities who organized the Woman's Way movement decided to take an alternative, smaller scale approach: they would form an association of United Ways that had supplementary councils (instead of putting together a separate Women's Way organization) that specifically addressed and raised awareness about women's and children's issues. In particular, these councils would focus on women and children's healthy development and growth. Founding Vice Chair of the UWSELA WLC—an

¹ This account is taken from a personal interview between Kim Sport, UWSELA WLC founder, and the author on February 26, 2013.

later, the chair—Carol Wise fully supported the initiate, telling Sport she thought it was “a spectacular idea” (C. Wise, personal communication, 13 February 2013). These councils, first part of a “Women’s Leadership Initiative” and later the “Women’s Leadership Council,” started to recruit members, and began to determine whether enough support existed to solidify the Council.

But as Kim Sport recalled, “This wasn’t going to happen with one woman sponsoring.” So, while she served as campaign chairperson, Sport “took this project on the road” and sent out invitations spreading the word about United Way’s newly formed women’s organization. She personally invited women she had specially selected to join the Women’s Leadership Initiative by providing the incentive of a yearly \$1000 payment. By 2002, she had amassed a committee of fifty women to become founding members of the Women’s Leadership Initiative. Sport noted she purposefully chose the founding UWSELA WLC members as representatives of various ages, ethnicities, and professional backgrounds. “I wanted the women to be as diverse as possible, geographically, every type of career, because I wanted women in the future to be able to look at the fifty founders and see themselves.”

Women and Philanthropy: Women’s Funding

Kim Sport’s initiative in the Greater New Orleans area encapsulates a micro manifestation of a macro national movement. Like Sport, many other women realized that although a large number of women participated in nonprofit work, they rarely participated in professional charity and philanthropy. Even today, the phrase “women and philanthropy” remains an oxymoron to many people (Clift 2005).

In conjunction with the plethora of social changes that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, many women, inspired by the civil rights movement, began to work for change in women’s treatment in the workplace, schools, media, at home, and in charity work (Fischer 2005). Often, universal charities and social service institutions failed to address women’s needs. These organizations lacked special services for victims of sexual assault, job training programs for women newly entering the workforce, and did not provide child care. There was a great need for alternative programs with services and policies tailored to help women. Moreover, if these programs were to successfully serve women, it would be important for women to create and manage their own initiatives. The women’s funding movement, a push for women’s work in charity, followed Hull House social reformer Jane Addams’ conviction that “indiscriminate giving” could yield “disastrous results” (Fisher 2005). In order for giving to be effective, women would have to have control over where their funds were going.

Beginning in the early 1980s, women began to use self-developed philanthropies to organize women’s organizations (Fischer 2005). In April 1985, twenty funding organizations met before the Council on Foundations in Bethesda, Maryland to create the National Network of Women’s Funds. Today, this body is known as the Women’s Funding Network (WFN) (Fischer 2005).

Still, while women have made great strides in philanthropic work since the 1960s, preconceived notions about women’s relationship to philanthropy diminish their role in the field. Some damaging ideas about women’s giving include: “women don’t know how to manage money,” “women don’t trust they’ll have enough for their old age,” “women only get involved in organizations they care about,” “women don’t give large donations,” “women have a hard time asking for money” (Capek 2005). Interestingly, although these notions denote women as stingy or cautious givers, women actually give more generously than men. Economists funded by the National Science Foundation found in double-blind experiments that “women, on average,

donate twice as much as men...when any factors that might confound cooperation are eliminated” (Capek 2005). More research could reveal patterns of giving by gender, as existing studies present conflicting data.

Jo Gruidly Moore and Marianne Philbin (2005) write, “Though women have a higher percentage rate of giving to charity, their average gift size still comes in at little more than half that of what men give.” There are many factors could contribute to women’s smaller donations: First, women have historically made less money than men, and therefore have less to give away. Second, women may tend to give less because charity organizations ask them to donate smaller amounts than they ask male benefactors to donate. Third, fundraisers may ignore women; women may give less if fundraisers do not ask them for donations.

Yet, times and circumstances rapidly change, and the well-prepared philanthropy organization responds to accommodate changes. Women have the resources necessary to enter the philanthropy sector: women own more than half the nation’s investment wealth and will accumulate more wealth as earned income increases in coming years. Furthermore, women live longer than men and, in coming decades, will inherit the majority of a predicted \$30 trillion intergenerational transfer of wealth (Moore and Philbin 2005).

National United Way Women’s Leadership Councils

Fueled by the philosophies of the feminist and women’s funding movements, Bonnie McElveen Hunter, former U.S. Ambassador to Finland, founded the United Way Women’s Leadership Council in 2002 based on this concept of merging women and philanthropy. By late 2002, the Women’s Leadership Council had expanded from four initial councils to twelve cities, including Kim Sport’s chapter in Southeast Louisiana. Today, the national network of United Way Women’s Leadership Councils has over 55,000 members in 130 U.S. communities (United Way 2013c). The United Way Women’s Leadership Council gives more money than any other women’s philanthropic group and has raised over \$1 billion in the past twelve years (United Way 2013c). Annual contributions per member range widely, from \$1,000 to \$10,000, and membership continues to grow.

The United Way Women’s Leadership Council’s mission seeks to “mobilize the power of women to advance the Common Good in our communities” (United Way 2013c). The United Way believes women have a unique perspective, and an ability to identify the most urgent community issues and implement change that actually makes a difference. The WLC bases its philosophies and principles on United Way research showing that women are most motivated philanthropically by “connection to a cause” (United Way 2013c). The United Way of America adopts the idea that addressing and targeting the most serious local issues, like education, income stability, and healthy living, will uplift the entire community and its quality of life (United Way 2013a). According to the WLC’s website, “When a network of caring, powerful women get together to engage in hands-on change, anything is possible” (2013). The Women’s Leadership Council urges women to “give, advocate, and volunteer” (2013c). The WLC’s vision strives to become “the most recognized, esteemed, and flourishing network of its kind to maximize the contribution of women to the Council and their communities—locally, nationally, and globally” (United Way 2013c).

Nationally, the WLC’s main focus is to help children meet national reading and literacy standards. In order to increase graduation rates, the WLC mobilizes 100,000 reading buddies, tutors, and mentors annually to foster children’s literacy. Like the National Women’s Leadership Council, each Women’s Leadership Council chapter throughout the

country adopts a set of goals and an area of emphasis. Projects made possible by the Women's Leadership Councils include a female foster youth emancipation in Ventura County, California, a program for parental engagement in inner city schools in San Antonio, and a visitation plan of neighborhood parks in Des Moines to foster playtime environments that promote literacy, math and social development activities. Community and company partners include UPS, Best Buy, Macy's, Merrill Lynch, and Wells Fargo (United Way 2013c).

Each United Way Women's Leadership Council develops its focus to play a part in and contribute to the United Way's overall "Goals for the Common Good, the United Way Challenge to America" (United Way 2013a). In 2008, the United Way began a ten-year program to achieve the following goals in education, financial stability, and health:

1. To cut the annual number of high school dropouts, 1.2 million students, in half.
2. To aid 1.9 million working families, or half of lower-income financially unstable families, in attaining financial independence.
3. To increase the amount of healthy, responsible children and adults by one-third.

In turn, the Women's Leadership Councils select their projects and goals to fit within the larger context of the United Way. The individual United Way Women's Leadership Councils of specific cities therefore face a special dilemma: How can they adhere to the national model while flourishing locally to ensure the improvement of people's lives and the development of lasting change in the community? Can the WLCs make decisions to target actual local issues, despite the fact that their members reside largely in the upper echelons of society? The development of a common language around diversity and inclusion seems to remain a work in progress. How can organizations such as the Women's Leadership Council fund controversial projects in activism without losing a stable funding base? Can the Women's Leadership Councils influence other funders and organizations to increase aid to support women and girls?

United Way of Southeast Louisiana's Women's Leadership Council Projects²

The United Way of Southeast Louisiana's Women's Leadership Council (UWSELA WLC) currently oversees five main projects: Success by Six, Nurse-Family Partnership, Women's Rebuild Weeks, Dress for Success, and the Children's Museum of St. Tammany (United Way 2013b).

Success by Six is an initiative spearheaded in over 300 cities in the United States and Canada to prepare children to enter school equipped with the skills for success by age six (United Way 2013d). The program works to ensure that children will meet standards set forth by the National Research Council before beginning their education; these include physical, emotional, and intellectual health and stability (United Way 2013d). According to the NRC, half of a child's intellectual development potential is established by age four (United Way 2013d). Thus, the first six years of a child's life have a large impact on a child's health and stability throughout his or her life. The seven key areas evaluated by Success by Six are quality of childcare, relationship with the caretaker, the family's economic opportunities,

² This account is taken from a personal interview between Carol Wise and the author on February 13, 2013.

engagement of neighborhood residents, safety and attractiveness of neighborhood, the family's access to services, and healthy development; quality of childcare is a primary concern of the program (United Way 2013d). With all of these components in place, children enter their first day of kindergarten ready to succeed, socially, developmentally, and academically.

Children who have benefited from Success by Six initiatives have higher retention and graduation rates, and lower crime and teen pregnancy rates. They are ultimately better prepared for the workforce and to contribute productively to their place of employment (United Way 2013d). Success by Six supports parents, educates lawmakers about early childhood education, makes services more widely available, and provides tools and training for parents, teachers, and childcare workers in St. Charles Parish (United Way 2013d). Success by Six also works with Born Learning, a public awareness campaign that champions turning everyday moments with infants and young children (ages 0-5) into learning opportunities (United Way 2013d).

The UWSELA WLC also partners with Nurse-Family Partnership, a maternal and early childhood health program that fosters long-term success for first-time moms, their babies, and society (United Way 2013b). The National WLC initiated a three-year grant to help first time mothers in need connect with registered nurses. This connection helps parents become knowledgeable and ready to provide the best conditions for their babies at vital early stages of life (United Way 2013b).

The St. Bernard Project, a non-profit organization that rebuilds homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in St. Bernard Parish, partnered with the UWSELA WLC to host the annual "Women's Rebuild Week" (St. Bernard Project 2013). Hundreds of local women and women from around the country gathered for two weeks to rebuild over 20 homes (St. Bernard Project 2013). Volunteers participate in all phases of rebuilding, from hanging insulation and sheetrock, painting, and putting down flooring, to installing cabinets, trimming, doors, and windows. At the end of the week, over 20 families were able leave their FEMA trailers and temporary housing and move back home (St. Bernard Project 2013).

WINGs (members of the UWSELA WLC that are under 35) partners with Dress for Success to collect donated purses, clothing, and accessories in new condition to outfit low-income women entering the workforce (United Way 2013b). Dress for Success New Orleans provides disadvantaged women economic independence through professional attire, a support network, and career development tools (Dress for Success 2013). Each client receives one suit when she has a job interview and additional clothing when she lands the job (Dress for Success 2013). The Dress for Success New Orleans Professional Women's Group program provides ongoing support to help her build a successful career (Dress for Success 2013).

Finally, Northshore members of the UWSELA WLC funded an exhibition at the Children's Museum of St. Tammany about early childhood development and programming (United Way 2013b). The UWSELA WLC pledged \$50,000 to the exhibit (United Way 2013b).

According to Carol Wise, "Every woman has a voice in WLC." The governing body of the UWSELA WLC consists mainly of founding members and meets regularly to discuss the unique needs of the greater New Orleans area and how to best address them (United Way 2013b). Once the governing body selects a new program, such as Success by Six, the remaining members approve decisions.

Because of her long history working for women's issues with the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, Carol Wise was one of the first women Sport contacted and invited to the UWSELA WLC. Wise served as Vice Chair at the time of founding and later became the Chair

of the Women's Leadership Council after Sport stepped down. Sport went on to serve as the president of the United Way of Southeast Louisiana. In February 2013, Wise received the National Alexis de Tocqueville Society Award from United Way for "outstanding commitment to service."

Wise explained that when she and Sport joined the WLC, they asked founding members what issues important to women they believed could realistically be addressed by the United Way's umbrella of programs. With the founding members, Sport started with the sufficient minimum of \$50,000 to start a United Way WLC chapter. Sport held an informal inaugural meeting at the New Orleans Ritz Carlton in 2001, which all founding members attended, to discuss what these women wished to do with their collective funds. Sport said, "This was a powerful group of women—highly opinionated, extremely intelligent" (K. Sport, personal communication, February 26 2013). They decided at the meeting to primarily help with children's issues, education, and early childhood development. Subsequently, Success by Six evolved into the UWSELA WLC's longest standing and most successful initiative. The members of the WLC formed the appropriate committees for policy, fundraising, recruiting new members, and planning activities, and agreed that Wise should chair Success by Six. Wise and her colleagues drew up a plan and vision for Success by Six, which was then approved by the Governing Body.

Wise stated that at the inaugural meeting, Sport also revealed she was "diagnosed with breast cancer, and had to be operated on immediately." Wise recalled that this marked an emotional moment which brought the women closer together:

Before the meeting, Kim didn't know whether she could do it. She asked me, "do you think I should tell them I will have to have chemo? I'll lose my hair, but the drive is not until the start of January, and we can have some meetings to bring people together, tell them what we're doing, and get it organized." So I told Kim that we're perfectly capable, and you've asked fifty capable women.

Although Sport did not know whether to tell the women about her condition, she explained her struggle with cancer at the end of the meeting. "All fifty women cried," Wise said, "and told Kim, 'We're behind you, 100%.'"

Sport went on to overcome her breast cancer and successfully host the UWSELA WLC Drive that year. In 2008, however, Sport was re-diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent breast removal and reconstructive surgery. Then, in 2010, Sport undertook radiation treatment for thyroid cancer. Sport's experiences with cancer and her realization that seven out of ten American women facing breast removal due to cancer are never informed that insurance covers reconstructive surgery sparked her activism within breast cancer policy and practice. Sport founded Breastoration, another philanthropic partnership, and chairs BRA Day USA, a national breast cancer reconstruction awareness campaign she launched in 2012. In 2010, she encouraged state officials to enforce a Louisiana law passed in 1998 requiring doctors to disclose information about reconstructive surgery after breast removal (Finch 2013). Sport stated, "Women who don't get that information suffer in silence with lifelong disfigurement that could have been thoroughly avoided, if they so choose, at the time they were diagnosed with breast cancer" (Finch 2013). Sport had ample experience in philanthropy and activism, and she brought her skills and talents to the development of the UWSELA WLC (K. Sport, personal communication, 26 February 2013).

Sport explained that following the first meeting, the UWSELA WLC ran a press

launch, sending a powerful and inspiring advertisement to the *Times Picayune*, *City Business*, and other local publications. The ad bore the slogan “What Do These Women Have in Common?” and featured a photo of all fifty founders with their names and titles. The advertisement explained that these leaders from different corners of the community had pooled their financial resources and talents together to make an impact. Sport noted that the ad received an overwhelmingly positive response, prompting a rise in membership and interest in the UWSELA WLC.

The second meeting in late 2001 sold out. The meeting featured Mary Landry (Coast Guard Rear Admiral) as the main speaker. Wise said, “The room at the Ritz Carlton accommodated two hundred, but four hundred people waited outside, and the line wrapped around the block...this clearly showed there was a need for women to be able to give to something that was hands-on and appealed specifically to women.” The second meeting mainly involved discussion of policy. Wise explained that the founders decided that joining the UWSELA WLC required an annual leadership gift of at least \$1,000. To sustain organizational operation, 20% of the gift would automatically go towards WLC funding, but members could designate a larger portion of their gift to WLC programs or the United Way’s Maximum Impact Fund. The Maximum Impact Fund aims to be a “Safety Net,” providing “financial stability for hard-working people” in the parishes of Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, and Washington (United Way 2013b). The donor can select the dollar amount towards education, health, and financial stability, or, to give blindly to “health and human care programs with proven, measurable results” (United Way” 2013b). Like other UW WLC chapters throughout the nation, the UWSELA WLC offered special membership options for members over 35, or WINGs (Women’s Initiative Next Generation projects) for members 35 and under. WINGs contribute a minimum donation of \$500, with \$100 automatically supporting WLC programs (United Way” 2013b).

By the end of the first founding year in 2002, the UWSELA WLC had over 400 members. At their peak in 2005, the WLC had nearly 1000 members. “Of course, Hurricane Katrina was a setback to every United Way organization,” Sport stated. “All financial support had to be allocated in a different way.” However, she also noted the indirect benefits of Hurricane Katrina. “If we were going to assume our focus on quality child care, and so many child care centers in New Orleans had to be totally rebuilt, why not push for legislation and put standards in place as they are rebuilt? Build them with quality, not the way they were before.” They could attack the issue of quality childcare from the roots, within the legislative system. Following Katrina, Wise and Success by Six developed an improved rating system for childcare facilities and regulations.

Epilogue

Sport believes that the UWSELA WLC changed the direction of United Way from a male dominated organization blind to the needs of women to an organization that largely engages women’s leadership and women’s participation to address women’s issues (K. Sport, Personal interview, February 26, 2013). She has witnessed numerous women serve as United Way campaign chairs and board chairs since the establishment of the UWSELA WLC, and leadership of women within the United Way has increased with more WLC chapters forming in cities across the nation (K. Sport, Personal interview, February 26, 2013). Carol Wise cites Sport’s role in getting women on the board as “an inspiration” and calls her “a real visionary” (C. Wise, personal interview, February 13, 2013).

Wise stated that the UWSELA WLC, with its customizable donation gift options, allowed “women to demonstrate how they really wanted their voice to be heard, from a Southern point of view”:

It’s terribly important to know where your money is going...there isn’t one of us who have had children who don’t understand how important childcare is and how important United Way causes are...As more women actually work, [knowing where your money goes] becomes an important aspect of how you work, and why you work” (Carol Wise, personal interview, February 13, 2013).

Wise admitted that she herself had underestimated the power of the UWSELA WLC for women. “After a meeting...that was so packed, and many stood to hear the speaker...one woman thanked us for being here to help,” Wise recalls. “She said, ‘I work, I work fulltime. I took off from my work to come to this. You’ve got to open more childcare facilities. We can’t come to work without a place to put our children. I came from work just to come say this to you’” (Carol Wise, personal interview, February 13, 2013). Wise explained that Success by Six did just that. Not only did they provide women the opportunity to go to work with childcare, they provided an environment that was safe, educationally enriching, and ensured children made it to kindergarten ready to succeed (Carol Wise, personal interview, February 13, 2013).

The Women’s Leadership Council of United Way and, in turn, the Women’s Funding Movement have entered a new era with an impressive legacy built on the efforts and strength of the founders of the UWSELA WLC. Today, the United Way of Southeast Louisiana’s Women’s Leadership Council continues to work with boldness, vision, and passion to move forward.

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