

PINK TEA SPEAKER

WANDA BEDARD, Founder and President, *60 million girls Foundation*

“Girls’ Education: A Conversation of Consequence”

In 2006 Wanda, the founder and head of a customized sheet metal manufacturing business and a McGill University commerce graduate, had the inspiration to establish a Montreal-based foundation dedicated to enabling girls to get an education in developing countries. She called it “60 million girls” because at the time there were 60 million primary school-aged girls around the world not in classrooms, more than half the global total at the time. “I wanted to do something lasting, but it didn’t happen overnight,” she told us. “It was step by step.” To achieve her goal that only one percent of funds raised go to administrative costs, she and her team, gathered from like-minded neighbours, friends and networking, are all volunteers, carving out time from business careers. The team numbered eight at first; there now are fourteen. To further keep down expenses, they have no office, instead meeting virtually; no fund-raising events, instead obtaining financing primarily from individuals by word of mouth; and personally pay for related travel expenses.

“Recently I went to a very remote area in Nicaragua, a large tropical forest -eight hours by jeep, then seven hours by dugout canoe in intense heat with mosquitoes,” she told us. “It was worth it because a young woman told me that the education she got at the high school we built, the first there, means she can become a nurse which otherwise would have been impossible. I love such stories.”

“60 million girls” partners with Canadian charities that have “a proven, sustainable track record.” It started with the Stephen Lewis Foundation and now deals with several more too. The process starts with the charities asking local communities in far-off remote places what they most need, then submitting proposals to “60 million girls.” In its first year the organization provided \$100,000 to one project. It now receives ten to fifteen proposals a year from which it selects three, giving each \$100,000. “We concentrate on the most underserved, remote, and vulnerable. Since 2006 we have given \$4 million to 35 projects in 20 countries, reaching 70,000 children,” Wanda said. “Our aim is to reduce gender disparity in school enrolment by ensuring at least half of the students impacted are girls and to provide quality education. That helps boys as well.”

Wanda has received numerous awards for her work including, recently, Canada’s distinguished Meritorious Service Cross for people who “benefit the nation.”

Initially, “60 million girls” concentrated on school construction. Because overcrowded classrooms – up to 100 students- and unqualified teachers were hindering learning, in 2012 the organization developed mobile learning labs- computer tablets given students that link to a server providing 1,000 learning sites including math, chemistry, music, geography, geology, health care, preparation for disasters, climate change. “We encourage self-directed learning, so we let the students figure out the technology. They do it quickly,” she said. She added: “It took about a decade for other NGOs to realize the huge potential. We’re now looking into voice messaging as a teaching tool. People must reimagine how to provide accessible education.”

“Education of girls is a tenet of our organization,” club vice-president Marian Archbold said in thanking Wanda. “Your organization is a crucible, a nub, a crux, in strategizing.”

Susan Goldenberg