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Jennifer Leonard

“This started with an Ambitious young woman who made the decision at 18, I wasn’t going to work at home, and I was going to compete in a tough Marketplace for woman to work making a successful career.”

-Jennifer Leonard

Rochester is home to various communities that have met many challenges. However, amidst all those challenges the Rochester Area Community Foundation founded in 1972 helped them rise above. Led by an astounding woman who has left a lasting and impressionable legacy behind her.

Jennifer Leonard is a passionate Philanthropist and mother of eight, spent her life dedicated to promoting and helping communities grow and flourish. Growing up in a middle-class household in Alexandria, Virginia as the third child of a World War II veteran and college-educated mother who both held high aspirations for their children’s success. She never once questioned if she wanted to be successful. She found her passion for charity and community within her first volunteer job taking care of children across childcare sects.

She graduated from Groveton High School, then attended Wellesley College, and then Occidental College in Los Angeles receiving her master’s in urban studies. It was there that she set her focus on community through the Summer Exposure Coro Foundation Fellows program. Furthering her education in the Coro Foundation experimental master’s program.

After college, she began her work with California Community Foundation in Los Angeles, starting as a Program Officer and later becoming an Executive Vice President of the foundation. Her most notable work raising funds for Children of Holocaust Events as more refugees made their way to Los Angeles. This fund was used for their education.

As she continued her work on a community level, she began to focus more on the different ways people were treated within various communities.

Taking what she learned from her work in Los Angeles she moved to Rochester, NY, to run the Rochester Area Community Foundation in 1993. For nearly 30 years as CEO and President, she worked to leverage community Philanthropy by making people more aware of the Foundation, providing incentives, and using basic marketing techniques to attract people to them as a “Destination Charity and not as a pass through.” By the time she was done, she raised the community foundation's endowment from \$32 million to \$600 million by her retirement.

This achievement did not come without challenges Ms. Leonard noted the challenges of being a woman in a professional position.

“Often I was the only woman in the room. If I wanted to contribute it called on me to be tougher than I was.” It required her to say what was on her mind and as a result her success grew. People began to listen to her as she spoke out more. She became good with small groups and great with large groups of people.

Her other accomplishments include changing the foundation's funding from large companies to everyday people. In 2006 the foundation had mostly mature donors around the age of 72, she wanted to create a connectivity with the community appealing more to younger donors through Giving Circles. A group of people with similar values come together and donate money to community projects. A variety of these circles were created such as the Rochester Women’s Giving Circle and Funds for the African American community.

Addressed many community challenges despite the difficulty and controversiality such as racial issues and education. She took community leadership into those areas. Ms. Lenoard states “For a charitable organization to contribute it takes a strong board that is willing to go out and do that.”

She set a goal to raise \$300 million of new endowment gifts in ten years through a large campaign, despite the Foundation not being a campaign organization. They shot past that goal.

Retiring on September 30, 2022, leaving an astounding legacy behind in the foundation. She believes her greatest legacy is a “Strong community institution that helps encourage and channels Philanthropic gifts that benefit the community and affect its future.”

Now in retirement, Ms. Leonard spends her time renovating her home. She volunteers with four charities in Rochester area and plays daytime tennis.