

Inspired Leadership: A profile of Frances Sheehan, president and CEO of the Brandywine Health Foundation

Melissa Fernandez 20 April 2016

"You can never underestimate the magic that can come out of human interaction," says Frances Sheehan, president and CEO of the Brandywine Health Foundation. This magic is at the heart of what motivates Ms. Sheehan as a leader who inspires others to lead, especially the next generation. "Change comes from young people deciding how they want to make a difference in their communities and working together to make it happen."

A commitment to cultivating and building up young people is one of the driving forces of the Foundation, celebrating its 15-year anniversary with a mission to improve the health and well-being of the Coatesville community by supporting an array of innovative projects that address both access to health services and the social factors that contribute to healthy outcomes. In addition to building the Brandywine Health & Housing Center and bringing the Youth Mental Health First Aid curriculum to Coatesville, one new initiative that Ms. Sheehan is particularly proud of

is called the Coatesville Area Youth Philanthropy Program (CAYPP).

Founded last summer by the Foundation and similar to the Philadelphia Foundation's YOUTHadelphia, CAYPP takes approximately a dozen youth from the Coatesville community and not only teaches them about philanthropy, but empowers them to direct how funding will be used. In this way, the participants actively engage in the process and realize that they have not only the potential but the responsibility to be agents of positive and sustainable change.

Perhaps what makes CAYPP an initiative ripe with such potential is that as members of the communities that they seek to serve, the young leaders become keenly aware of how important it is to address the underlying factors that impede well-being, a multitude of socioeconomic barriers which include housing, transportation, education and many others.

"It's very clear that where you live and what your economic status is directly impacts the quality of your health and your longevity," says Ms. Sheehan.

This is why the Brandywine Health Foundation takes a holistic approach to finding solutions to health challenges by focusing on a number of issues related to health equity, behavioral health, environment and recreation, and of course, youth development.

Prior to serving at the helm of Brandywine, Ms. Sheehan served as the CEO of Planned Parenthood of Chester County and as one of the founding members and president of the board of directors of the Coatesville Center for Community Health. She is past president of the Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia and has been recognized through several prominent awards as a leader worthy of emulation, including being named a Woman of Distinction by the Philadelphia Business Journal and she received the March of Dimes' Chester County Woman of Achievement in the Field of Health Award. Ms. Sheehan holds degrees from Wesleyan University and Temple University.

When asked what drew her toward a career in population health and what further keeps her motivated toward empowering youth and communities, Ms. Sheehan references the time she spent at Planned Parenthood.

"I saw that so many of the young women we served were looking for not just access to high-quality health services, but a sense of agency in the world. They were looking for a sense that they had a future, whether that is graduating from college or going to tech school. This sense of agency is related to managing our health status but it's also bigger than that."

In addition to believing the social sector can work to instill this sense of agency to promote healthy lifestyles, Ms. Sheehan also speaks about the power of partnership. She

states that philanthropy is most successful when foundations and organizations leverage their strengths to address broader issues. She refers to the tendency of organizations to work within discrete silos, which she sees as an impediment to progress. On the contrary, everyone benefits from public agencies, nonprofits, chambers of commerce, etc., convening the right partners and creating and implementing solutions together.

Of leadership, Ms. Sheehan is grateful for what she refers to as a "countless number of leaders" who have inspired her over her years in service. These include fellow board members, staff members and especially the people who are on the ground implementing initiatives and working with community members directly. "There are just so many good people out there doing tough work and they inspire me every day."

It is hard not to admire Ms. Sheehan's passion for public service, which resonates as she speaks about the vast potential for foundations, organizations, communities and youth to effect change and make positive differences in their communities. With Frances Sheehan's earnest leadership and undeterred commitment to inspiring youth to be active agents of change, the future looks bright for budding leaders in Coatesville and that's a magic no one should underestimate.