

WHO, WHAT, WHEN?

BETAH And Bell-Taylor

Sherri LaReaux

Nobody understands the truth behind the old adage, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger," better than Wilhelmina Bell-Taylor.

Bell-Taylor started life normally enough. She grew up in a small steel town just north of Pittsburgh—Aliquippa to be exact—the second of three children born to a police officer and his wife. Academics were encouraged in her home, and Bell-Taylor took to them with fervor, transforming herself into a student of life.

But she soon encountered some tough courses in life's lesson plan. It wasn't long after she entered the University of Pittsburgh that Bell-Taylor was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease. For the 19-year-old, "It was a life-changing experience, because while other students were living and dreaming about their life visions for the future, I was told to just live one day at a time." To beat the disease, she was prescribed such aggressive doses of radiation that doctors told her she might have to rethink her dreams of having children.

While the world seemed to be crashing in around her, Bell-Taylor focused on the positive and the strength of her faith in God. "I attribute my being alive and my success to this," she says matter-of-factly. Since her early bout with the disease, Bell-Taylor has been in remission, and doctors consider her "cured."

So Bell-Taylor got on with the business of life. She earned an undergraduate degree in English and Language Arts and went on to graduate studies. She married. She worked for the Pennsylvania Department of Education as director of reading improvement. And she defied medical odds by giving birth to a healthy baby girl.

Five years in the job as Pennsylvania curriculum director led Bell-Taylor to Washington, where she landed a position at an educational consulting firm. Her work here, and in a business consulting firm, taught her much about the world of business. "I was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug," she says with a smile in her voice. Bell-Taylor served as right-hand woman to several company presidents, learning how to run a company by paying attention to its assets and flaws.

At the end of a busy day, Bell-Taylor would take off her business hat and replace it with two hats, one marked "Mommy" and the other marked "Daddy." As a single parent, Bell-Taylor found that her relationship with her daughter had become even more vital. The woman who once gave life to her daughter now

sees that the daughter has given life back to her. "I have a wonderful daughter, and [she is] just a joy."

Despite the assorted hats Bell-Taylor wore for many years, she never forgot her dream of owning her own company. And it is fitting that she chose to do so in a field that had once been so formidable for her, that of health.

In 1995, Bell-Taylor opened BETAH Associates, Inc. (pronounced "Beta"). Looking for spiritual strength from her pastor during the formation of her company, she discovered that some companies use Biblical references in their titles. When the two happened upon the word "betah," which means "trust" and "confidence" in the Old Testament, Bell-Taylor knew it was a perfect fit.

Bell-Taylor says her Bethesda-based management consulting and communications services firm helps organizations build connections based on trust and confidence with the communities they are trying to reach. BETAH's speciality is working with efforts aimed at low-income community revitalization, health initiatives and empowerment of minority and ethnic groups through communications, training and technical assistance.

A highlight of BETAH's work has come through aiding U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher, and the leadership campaign on AIDS to educate communities of color about their high risk for contracting the disease and to teach what they can do to halt it.

"The greatest danger we are faced with is complacency," says Bell-Taylor. "It has been over 20 years since the first case was identified. People believe that because drugs are available they no longer need to modify their behavior. But while there are drugs available to lessen the pain and lengthen the lives of AIDS patients, no cure has been found yet."

In the wake of September 11th, thousands of potential donors were confronted with the fact that their blood could not be accepted because they were infected with HIV. "There are nearly 300,000 people infected with the virus who don't know that they have it," she says.

Bell-Taylor is proud that her organization has a role in "continuing to beat the drum and make people



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aware that this is a serious health problem." To build grass-roots confidence in an agency like the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, BETAH looks to the community itself for inspiration. "Community people are the best spokespersons," Bell-Taylor says. "We're not trying to create illusions, we're showing what is."

BETAH works with more than just large government health agencies. The word-of-mouth referrals have garnered accounts with pharmaceuticals, state and local government agencies, corporations, community and faith-based groups, foundations and educational institutions. BETAH's rapid rise earned the company distinction as one of *INC.* magazine's 500 fastest-growing companies in the nation in 2000.

Bell-Taylor attributes her company's many successes to one main thing. "My philosophy of business is different. A lot of business owners are bottom line, and that's all they care about. One of my major objectives is to create opportunities for the people who work here—help people to grow and to develop and to achieve." She remembers her own distasteful experiences at companies where excellence was left unrewarded, where people suspiciously watched their own backs and worried that others might steal their ideas.

Each person in BETAH's 50-member team is nurtured professionally through bonuses, a growing benefits package, training and in-house development. "We're a team," she says confidently. "We're really a team."

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