

Catherine Bertini

As a young girl growing up in Eastwood, I read “Elizabeth Blackwell MD: The First Woman Doctor,” the story of a woman from Upstate New York who fought against entrenched traditions to achieve her goals. She opened my eyes and filled me with thoughts of what I might be able to accomplish.

By the time I was attending Cortland High School, and my father was a leader in the local Republican Party and a city councilor, I was captivated with the idea of government service. Before I knew exactly what my life’s mission would be, I knew I wanted to use my skills to make a difference. The quote I chose for my senior yearbook was from British statesman Edmund Burke: “All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in the world is for enough good men to do nothing.”

For 15 years after graduating from State University at Albany, I worked in politics and in corporate public affairs. Then I had the opportunity to manage national welfare programs at the Department of Health and Human Services. There it became clear that the poorest Americans were women and their children. I led the effort to create public policy that ensured education and training programs for these women. It was my first significant experience in “making a difference.”

Under President George H. W. Bush, I was the Department of Agriculture’s assistant secretary for food and consumer services. I successfully directed a breakthrough program to allow states to deliver food stamps and welfare benefits through electronic transfers and initiated a food package for breastfeeding mothers for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. We created the Food Guide Pyramid. My second “difference.”

The third came as executive director of the United Nations World Food Program, which I led for 10 years, based in Rome. There, I realized that it was not just in America that the poorest of the poor are in female-headed households. We partnered with women to deliver food, to listen to their voices, and to put them in leadership positions in efforts to reach many of the most impoverished people in the world.

In delivering food aid to over 700,000 people, we fed most of the schoolchildren in North Korea, opened bakeries for widows in Afghanistan under the Taliban and kept people alive who were living in the midst of wars and natural disasters. I was recognized for this work as the 2003 World Food Prize Laureate.

After my next responsibility of managing the physical, financial and human resources of the United Nations as undersecretary-general for management, I accepted an invitation to become a professor of public administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. I also serve on the board of directors of the Tupperware Brands Corp., whose sales are largely dependent on the efforts of 2 million women throughout the world.

With Cortland as my home base, I remain connected to humanitarian work. I was a senior fellow for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, am a board member of former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s Global Humanitarian Forum and am on the jury of the Hilton Foundation’s Humanitarian Prize. I co-chair the agricultural task force of The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

Throughout my professional life, I have had a calling to advocate on behalf of people in need, and to help make systems more responsive to them. Though I left Central New York to pursue that mission, I happily returned to my roots, where I continue to try to make a difference.

Although I no longer bounce along on dirt roads in the developing world very often, I still have an impact by teaching graduate students who share the same calling — to change the world. ❖

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PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN D. CANNARELLI

My advice to others:
Identify your dreams. Set your goals. Keep your principles.
Always do what you know to be the right thing, even if it is difficult.