

Tess Reynolds: A Journey Through Tragedy and Faith to the Nonprofit Sector

Position: Chief Executive Officer, New Door Ventures

Start Date: October 2003

Education: BA, Economics, Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines; MBA, Santa Clara University

Previous For-Profit Experience: Consumer packaged goods; business unit general manager in the PC software industry; principal and owner of management consulting firm working with technology companies

Previous Nonprofit Experience: Volunteered for Lucile Packard Hospital for Children and Foundation for Children's Health; board member of Parents Helping Parents; actively involved in local church

Organization Information: Youth development/social enterprise organization; founded in 1981; based in San Francisco; 36 employees; \$5.5 million budget

Tess Reynolds's transition to the nonprofit sector was a journey marked by personal tragedy and faith. From the beginning of her career in high-technology management, Reynolds experienced great success—playing an instrumental role in the creation and market success of Harvard Graphics, a software package that was the corporate standard in presentation graphics software up until the early 1990s.

The high-tech consulting firm she later founded also flourished. But in 2003, she left the for-profit sector to become CEO of New Door Ventures (formerly called Golden Gate Community, Inc.). As Reynolds explained, "My decision to switch to the nonprofit sector was for personal reasons, but I suppose at the end of the day it's all personal."

Reynolds had worked in high technology since the mid-1980s and said she had reached a phase where she was restless in her tech practice. But her career crisis did not come to a head until after she was forced to deal with a personal crisis—the death of her son Matthew in 2000. He died at the age of eight, after being treated for bone cancer at the Lucile Packard Hospital for Children.

"Having that type of loss in your life makes you question how you live your life," Reynolds said. "I thought about the value of the power I had, the doors open to me, the friends I had in high places, my business skills, my mom skills....I looked at everything and yearned for a call to something that made my whole life make sense."

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For the two years after Matthew died, Reynolds kept consulting in technology but she said it felt flat. “I started exploring different areas, being open to new opportunities, and continued praying about my career,” she said. “I found myself volunteering more for the children’s hospital and the foundation that supports it, but I didn’t see how health care could leverage my business background.”

Then Reynolds got a call from an executive recruiter who was conducting a search for New Door Ventures, a Christian nonprofit in San Francisco that provides employment and case management for at-risk youth through the social enterprises it owns and manages, including a multi-million-dollar silkscreen printing business and a bicycle repair shop. New Door’s previous executive director was a minister who had learned to manage the business side of the organization. Now the board was looking for a business person who also had a passion for the organization’s ministry.

Although Reynolds said New Door Ventures had exactly the kind of mission she had been longing for, she did not immediately jump at the opportunity. “I kept fighting it, thinking, ‘This is crazy; it’s a tiny, \$3 million organization. I’ve run a \$150 million business and consulted for billion dollar clients!’” she said. “But I felt like everything pointed to the New Door position. I was inspired by the clients and wanted to be part of transforming their lives.”

She added, “I don’t know that I would have made this switch outside of the context of faith. I would have been content to keep working for money and giving away some, plus volunteering locally and abroad. But God planted a restlessness in my heart and I really felt called to a change.”

And Reynolds said she was very impressed by the board of directors and the core talent on staff at New Door. She said it was clear that New Door needed fund development to build the organization, and that the organization was poised for rapid growth. “These were all the things I liked to do,” she said. “As I prayed, I felt more of a sense that this was in fact a call, there was no running around it. I thought, ‘I’m already in love with this organization, I have enough assets to do whatever I want, I have nothing to lose.’”

When Reynolds joined New Door, her son Chris was about to become a senior in high school and she and her husband had already saved enough for his college expenses. “With Matt gone, we had no other kids to save college funds for,” Reynolds said. “We didn’t have a big mortgage on our home. In terms of financial and parenting responsibilities, I was ready to work at something meaningful even if it paid less, and my husband supported that.”

Reynolds said her transition to the nonprofit sector was made easier by not coming directly from an executive position in a publicly-held company. Instead, she had taken two steps in between: running a start-up, and then running her own consulting business. “The last two taught me how to operate at a high level with less staff and money,” she said. “I had been weaned off stock options and high-class travel and other executive perks—joining New Door wasn’t as big of an adjustment.”

Reynolds said she makes less money than she made a decade ago, but she argues that she is actually better paid: “I get to see 17-year-old Jessica take pride in being a good mom to her three-year-old son. I get to hear Vanessa say, ‘I used to be a troublemaker, now I’m in college and I want to be a cop.’ I get to hear Giovanni say, ‘You can’t get rid of me now...I’ve been coming four years and I’m going to keep coming back—to mentor other youth.’ There’s not much that’s more rewarding than that!”

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