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From The Heart

Mary Tidlund translates success in business into a philanthropic legacy



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From The Heart

Mary Tidlund translates success in business into a philanthropic legacy

BY CAMIE LEARD

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Mary Tidlund and a Baobab Tree in Tanzania which is considered sacred in much of Africa.

Mary Tidlund didn't quite know what to do. Her previously successful oil and gas company had fallen victim to tough economic times and she'd just endured the hardest thing she'd ever have to do – lay off more than 250 employees and face shareholders. She was exhausted, she was heartbroken and she was looking for direction. So, with no other place to go, she loaded her backpack and began a trek that would take her around the world and deep into her heart where she would find her new purpose – simple yet profound: to help her fellow human beings. But Tidlund's story begins long before that catalytic trek around the world.

Born in Calgary in 1956, Tidlund was taken in by a loving foster family at one month old. The family adopted her at the age of eight making her a permanent part of a family of five children – four of whom had come from foster care.

"I learned early on the concept of 'philanthropy of the heart,'" says Tidlund. "My parents took in more than 40 foster children

over the years." Her father, a postman, and her stay-at-home mother set an example that would lead Tidlund throughout her life.

"There weren't a lot of funds – it was a simple home, but it was full of love. My parents really instilled in me the idea that when I got older I would give back somehow."

While admiration for her mother had her imagining marriage and a house full of her own children, Tidlund discovered that her genetic father had been a university graduate – something no one in her family had yet accomplished.

"I thought, 'If he can do it, I can do it,'" she says. So, she put her family plans away and enrolled at the University of Calgary where she earned her bachelor of science in geography in 1980. After her post-secondary sojourn, Tidlund took a job with PanCanadian Petroleum (now EnCana) where she worked as a land man for five years.

"It was a great experience and I learned a lot working at PanCanadian," she says. "But after five years, I thought there

might be a different way of doing things than the large companies were doing. I decided to team up with some partners and start our own company,” she says. “So in 1988, I joined a private oil and gas company called The Magnificent Seven Corporation.”

With most of the company’s exploration and drilling happening in the southeast part of Saskatchewan, in 1990 Tidlund and her partners moved to a small community of 500 called Arcola – a town whose claim to fame is having been the setting of W.O. Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

“I realized how absolutely blessed we are to live where we do. And that I had too many business skills to let go to waste. I knew I could apply what I’d learned in business to build a successful philanthropic organization.” ~ Mary Tidlund

In 1990 part of the Magnificent Seven’s assets became Williston Wildcatters which was ready to go public and the group took over Trophy Resources Ltd. listed on the Alberta Stock Exchange with Tidlund as president and CEO. Shortly after, Trophy became Williston Wildcatters Oil Corporation and listed on the TSX.

Williston Wildcatters grew quickly. With exploration, drilling and service divisions, Tidlund and her team had operations in all sides of the business. The company reached a market capitalization value of \$35 million and employed more than 250 people. Williston Wildcatters was also innovative as one of the first com-



Mary Tidlund

Photo by Mathieson & Hewitt Photographers



A school in an IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) Camp in Uganda.

Photo by Moreah Ragusa

panies to employ horizontal drilling technology with its private company The Long Riders Rig Corporation.

“We were pioneering that technology,” says Tidlund. “We were drilling hundreds of wells while testing horizontal drilling long before the rest of the industry accepted the technology.”

In 1993, Tidlund was a finalist in the national BMO/Financial Post Canadian Women Entrepreneur Awards and was featured on CBC’s *Venture* in 1994. She also won the Entrepreneurial Women Like Me “In Awards” for having the most impact on the local community. The impact she and her company had on Arcola was immeasurable and went beyond creating employment and injecting oil money into the local economy. She also partnered extensively with local entrepreneurs to restore some of Arcola’s many historic buildings and start new businesses including an art gallery, western clothing store and a restaurant.

But when the price of oil began to drop to below \$20 a barrel in the mid-’90s, Williston Wildcatters ran into trouble. With a business model that made it difficult to compete in exploration and an extensive fleet of drilling rigs and service vehicles that represented a heavy capital asset load Williston Wildcatters was no longer able to turn a profit and the company’s creditors voted the company down and in 1995 Tidlund’s company claimed bankruptcy.

“That was the hardest thing I ever had to do,” says Tidlund, still visibly upset more than 10 years later. “Laying off 250 people was absolutely devastating.”

Feeling defeated and lost, Tidlund decided to seek solace – and

direction – in isolated regions around the world. She trekked through mountain ranges spanning the globe and no matter where she found herself, one thing kept coming back again and again.

“I kept seeing these villages where people had so little,” she says. “The orphanages were especially close to my heart. I could easily have been one of those children.” And so some of the poorest people on the planet inspired a woman from one of the richest nations in the world to set about making a difference. Tidlund decided to start a charitable foundation to help these and other people around the world fill their most basic needs.

“I realized how absolutely blessed we are to live where we do,” she says. “And that I had too many business skills to let go to waste. I knew I could apply what I’d learned in business to build a successful philanthropic organization.”

Armed with a new sense of purpose, Tidlund returned to Calgary and assembled a team of people to help make her dream a reality. The Mary A. Tidlund Charitable Foundation was founded on October 14, 1998.

After a trial run with Operation Eyesight in India, Tidlund and her team were ready to start their first project. Dr. Violet Shadd,

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Lynn Rowley,
Health & Safety
Management Administrator
Volunteered her time with Habitat for
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A Woman outside one of the medical clinics put on near Karatu, Tanzania.

one of the directors on the foundation's board, suggested operating medical clinics in the Amazon where women and their children didn't have access to good medical care.

In 1999, Shadd and Tidlund set off for Peru where they set up a clinic in a one room school in the small village of Bello Horizonte. Hundreds of children and adults were treated at the school and the clinic by a medical team composed of Shadd and two Peruvian doctors one of whom offered dental care. In 2000, the foundation expanded its clinics to Ecuador.

But Tidlund's foundation supports more than medical projects.

In 2002, Tidlund, Shadd and Eliza Cutcher visited Angola, a war-torn African nation declared by UNICEF to be the worst country in which to be a child, to see how they could help. The team ended up partnering in a micro-loan program to get women in their own businesses and empower them to care for their families and funding a medical centre for babies in the capital city Luanda.

Tidlund says the foundation focuses on the people more than the projects and that it will help a community only after the community has itself decided how it would like to be helped.

"We're non-religious and focus on mutual respect and listening



Photo courtesy of Mary Tidlund



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 **EducationMatters**
calgary's public education trust

to each other,” she says. “We provide what the community decides it needs – that way it works.”

Today, Tidlund’s foundation is active in medical, water filtration, education, housing, health, micro-finance, homeless and other projects all over the world – from right here in Calgary to Angola, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Haiti, India, Nepal and others.

“It’s amazing to see what happens when people become engaged. The change is incredible and they find a great deal of joy. That’s what’s so rewarding about this work.” ~ Mary Tidlund

Tidlund says her work with the foundation is a natural extension of her experience as an entrepreneur and executive.

“I couldn’t do what I’m doing without having done what I did,” she says. “It’s team building, it’s matching the right people with the right programs – it’s very much the same, except that was profit driven and this is heart driven.”

Of course raising money for a private junior oil and gas company gave her much valued fundraising skills that allow her to keep

the Tidlund Foundation thriving. She says having been born and raised in Calgary is a major advantage when it comes to encouraging philanthropy.

“I am blessed to know a lot of people in this great city,” she says. “It’s all about engaging people and getting them involved. And Calgary is not only a prosperous, but also a generous city. It seems people are more aware of the need that is out there. Many Calgarians have had a lot of success and feel it’s time to give back.”

One of those people is John Webster, owner of Webster Galleries and avid supporter of Tidlund’s foundation. Webster donated his gallery space for Tidlund’s major 2007 fundraiser in June which raised \$60,000 for children in Uganda and the other foundation programs. He says people like Tidlund make it easier for Calgary businesses to help.

“When you have people like Mary around, it’s easy to give,” he says. “She allows us to accomplish things together that we simply couldn’t do on our own. Each of us can give our little piece and know it’s going to a good place.”

Tidlund is as recognized for her philanthropic efforts as she was



One of the medical clinics put on near Karatu, Tanzania.

Photo courtesy of Mary Tidlund

in her professional ones. In 2000, Tidlund was awarded the Alberta Black Achievement Award for Humanitarianism and just this year, she received the Harry Jerome Presidents Award from the Canadian Black Business and Professionals Association. And while she says she's deeply honoured to have received this kind of recognition, the most rewarding aspect of her work is seeing the result of the foundation's work, not only in the countries in which it works, but in the Canadian volunteers, donor and sponsors who

all help make it happen.

"It's amazing to see what happens when people become engaged," she says. "The change is incredible and they find a great deal of joy. That's what's so rewarding about this work." BIC

TO SEE HOW YOU CAN HELP THE MARY A. TIDLUND CHARITABLE FOUNDATION CARRY OUT ITS WORK, VISIT THE WEBSITE AT WWW.TIDLUNDFOUNDATION.COM.



The well at an IDP Camp in Gulu, Uganda.

Photo by Mary Tidlund



A group of children at an IDP Camp in Uganda.

Photo by Carolyn Lefebvre

The Calgary Elks

Lodge and
Golf Course



Once simply considered a Lodge, The Calgary Elks has emerged as one of the City's premiere golf facilities and a Leader in Charitable activities.

Nationally and Provincially, The Calgary Elks annually contributes over \$20,000 to Foundations for Children.

In 2007 The Calgary Elks supported Habitat for Humanity with \$15,000 and Member and Staff construction workforce days. The Alberta Children's Hospital received \$26,000 through the Club's hosting of the Canadian Tour's ATB Financial Classic.

The support of needy families with food hampers during the Holiday season, assistance with community playground development, Youth team sponsorships, Post Secondary scholarships, and other Community based activities are continued priorities. Charitable giving was in excess of \$80,000 in 2006 and the goal for 2007 is \$100,000.

Our Members proudly contribute a significant portion of the charitable funds raised through the Calgary Elks.



L-R: Brian Gancheff, Jeanie Bird, Lal Narang at a Habitat for Humanity Build.

The Calgary Elks is committed to having ecstatic members, great golf and contributing to a better community.