

# In Their Own Words... Susan Sherman

Anne Saporito 27 September 2009

Since 1996, Susan Sherman, RN, MA, has served as President and CEO of the Independence Foundation in Philadelphia, a private philanthropy with annual giving of over \$8 million. Ms. Sherman is a member of the board of directors of several local and national organizations, and she has received numerous awards for her service and leadership in the public sector, education and nursing, particularly in Philadelphia. We were fortunate to spend a few minutes talking to her about her insights on Philadelphia, leadership and innovation.

## **What are a few key ingredients to successful leadership?**

It's a few things. Clarity of mission and being able to put that mission into concrete words and terms. Staying the course. Investing in really good people. Seeing yourself as more of a mentor and less as a leader.

## **Were you ever mentored?**

Yes, at every point in my career.

## **What did it teach you?**

One thing I learned is that sometimes you have to seek out mentors — you have to be the active participant. You also have to be willing to be vulnerable in that position. You can't define yourself in narrow parameters. In the words of my father, my original mentor, you have to be willing to do the job that you really want to get. You have to be open to the potential for opportunities and be willing to work towards them.

### **Let's talk about Philadelphia. Do you think we're an innovative city?**

Philly is a very innovative city. I've seen it turn itself around remarkably over the past 10 to 12 years. When I started commuting into the city in 1996, there was no place to go after 5 p.m. Broad Street had one restaurant, and it was only open for lunch. Now it's a vibrant city, with a very active arts and culture scene.

### **What was unique about the past 15 years that made this growth possible?**

I really think it started with [Mayor] Ed Rendell.

### **What challenges does Philly still have ahead?**

Our school systems need improvement. Public transit. We need to attract more company headquarters to allow good opportunities at all levels of job employment. We still have issues of

homelessness and accessibility of housing, gun violence... . We need a safer environment.

**What about your organization, Independence Foundation? What sorts of projects and innovations have you supported over the years?**

I'm proud that Independence Foundation has been a leader in supporting nurse-managed health centers as a strong primary care option for communities. Years ago, we saw the need for this alternative to physician-based care, and decided to invest in these nurse-managed health centers and have watched them grow into an enormously successful and quality-based innovation. We also saw the need to invest in a support organization, the National Nursing Centers Consortium, which could support the growth and development of the innovation. As a funder, we understand it takes more than a decade to invest in an innovation and help to nurture and grow it before it comes to fruition. Once it does, it is very satisfying.

**What mistakes have you made?**

I had a job when I was younger, as a faculty member, and I challenged the head of the department a bit too much. Apparently they didn't think I was smart as I thought I was! But I learned that change doesn't come just because you want it to. I got fired, but was it a good thing? [laughs] Yeah, I got a better job!

**Would you say it was a lesson in politics?**

Oh yeah!