

Laurada Byers

Chair, Byerschool Foundation
Founder, Russell Byers Charter School

Professional Accomplishments

There are two choices when faced with a life-shattering experience: retreat into a shell or continue to live. Laurada Byers chose to live.

In 1999, her husband, prominent *Philadelphia Daily News* columnist Russell Byers, was murdered in front of her during a failed robbery attempt. Three months later, she began laying the groundwork for opening a public charter elementary school in his memory, something she and Russell, a champion of public education, had talked about just weeks before his death.

Creating a new school is an ambitious project, but Laurada overcame its challenges. The conception and inception of the Russell Byers Charter School, along with the intense planning and preparation for the opening, all proved to be a cathartic experience for her.

A master organizer, Laurada's initial advisory board for the school was a veritable "Who's Who" in Philadelphia: Charlie Pizzi, president of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce; Rosemarie Greco, former president and CEO of Corestates; Congressman Dwight Evans; Linda Morrison, former policy adviser for Ed Rendell; and Sam Katz, former mayoral candidate and CEO of Greater Philadelphia First.

Today, six years after opening in Spring Garden, the Russell Byers Charter School has moved into a beautiful new facility in Center City, increased the student body to 400 children in four-year-old kindergarten through sixth grade, seen a dramatic rise in test scores, and put a unique curriculum in place that captures the imagination of the children. The school draws students from 37 different Philadelphia neighborhoods; 70% of them are from low-income families. The school's mission is to provide a rigorous education while cultivating self-assurance along with a love of fresh ideas.

No longer as involved in the day-to-day administration of the school, Laurada has now turned her attention to fundraising as the chair of the Byerschool Foundation. In this role she works tirelessly to raise money to support the school. She takes no salary or other monetary compensation. She says she gets paid in huge hugs and kisses from the children.

Prior to her involvement with the Russell Byers Charter School, Laurada lived a varied life. In 1992 she founded Warthog Productions, which creates products that use humor and compassion to educate and enrich peoples' lives. She also co-authored a book, *Book of Blessings – 52 Graces From Around the World*, that features blessings from various religions and ethnicities worldwide.

Prior to starting Warthog Productions, Laurada was vice president of Diversified Search, Inc., the largest Philadelphia-based executive search firm; director of marketing at the University City Science Center; and director of sales and marketing for Rittenhouse Towers (now the Rittenhouse Hotel). A licensed real estate broker from 1976-1986, Laurada earned her MBA from Temple University in 1990.

Community Involvement

Despite her enormous commitment to the Byers School, Laurada finds the time to remain actively involved in other worthy endeavors. Since 1971, she has been a board member of International House Philadelphia, a program that encourages cross-cultural understanding while assisting 400 students from more than 65 countries in their adjustment to American society and to life in Philadelphia. As chair of the board of International House in the early '90s, Laurada was a pivotal influence in founding the Festival of World Cinema, which later became the Philadelphia Film Festival.

Supporting women's issues has also been a priority for Laurada. For the past 30 years she has served in numerous leadership positions at Women's Way, whose women-centered funding, advocacy, and education help sustain more than 30 different social agencies in the region.

Laurada's other contributions and accomplishments in the local not-for-profit arena include:

- Co-founder of the 56% League, an organization that advances women's political issues in Philadelphia
- Board member for the Alliance of Charter Schools
- Co-founder of University Citigroup, an organization that promotes University City in West Philadelphia
- Past board chair and executive committee member of the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PAID)
- Past president of the West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce
- Member of the *Women's Financial Services Network* Advisory Board for PNC Wealth Management, serving the Philadelphia region

Awards and Milestones

Laurada has won a number of awards for her community service including:

- The National Organization of Fundraising Executives' "Volunteer Fundraiser of the Year" in 1992.
- *Philadelphia* magazine's 2004 "Volunteer of the Year" award.
- The Kent School's first-ever "Reverend Frederick H. Sill, O.H.C. Society Award" in 2006, for personal achievement and distinguished service to mankind that bring honor and distinction to themselves and to Kent School.
- The "Take the Lead" award from the Girl Scouts of Southeastern Pennsylvania in 2006, given to women who have demonstrated exemplary achievement in their profession or field.