

Even leaders need leaders

Patty Komko shows the way to better management, entrepreneurship

BY AMANDA KOOSER | SPECIAL TO NMBW

You can tell a lot about a person by their reaction to a blank sheet of paper. Some find it frustrating. Some get writer's block. Patty Komko, co-founder and president of Leadership New Mexico, gets excited.

Now in its 15th year, the educational 501(c)(3) nonprofit is fueled by a staff of four and a massive network of volunteers made up of the program's high-powered alumni. All of that traces back to what Komko was able to do with a blank sheet of paper.

Let's step back for a moment. New Mexico is a long way from the verdant community of Parkland, Wash., that Komko calls her hometown. Born in Japan into a military family, she had traveled halfway around the world by the time she was 12.

When asked who her leadership role models were growing up, she doesn't hesitate.

"My dad and my mom. They exposed us to all these things as kids," says Komko. "I remember standing at the end of the oven at Dachau and my mom and dad saying, 'This is how some people treat each other. This is wrong.'"

Those early lessons as well as valuing diversity, exploration and adventure have stuck with Komko throughout her professional life. She received a master's degree in community and adult education and organizational development from the University of Oregon in 1979. After nine happy years of Oregon living, she never expected to leave that state. Komko's eventual transition from the Pacific Northwest to the high desert of Albuquerque came by way of a detour through Texas.

A compelling position at the national headquarters of the American Heart Association lured Komko to Dallas.

"I moved from the most beautiful place on Earth to the ugliest place on Earth," says Komko. "But the job was fantastic. That job made me have the confidence to do what I do today."



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She soon became the director of the consulting division for the education department.

Life-changing events happen to just about everybody. It can be a lost job, a death in the family or the arrival of a first child. For Komko, it was 4 o'clock on an April morning in 1989. With so much travel on her schedule, actually being home was a rare event.

"I literally woke up at my house in Dal-

las and I had no idea where I was. I was so disoriented. I said life should be better than this and I think I need a change."

Komko isn't one to sit around and just contemplate change; she makes it happen.

Though she easily could have gone back to the misty rains of the Pacific Northwest, Dallas's proximity ended up netting Komko for New Mexico.

"I had been out here a number of times on vacation to Taos and Santa Fe, doing

the tourist thing," she says. "New Mexico was a place that was on my radar screen."

That year she took the position of executive director for the American Heart Association of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Four years later she left to start her own consulting business. Her work on a \$29.2 million bond campaign was instrumental in the launching of the Rio Rancho Public Schools in the mid-1990s.

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With a little extra time on her hands, she was receptive when close friend Ron Zee first approached her in 1993 with the idea of launching Leadership New Mexico.

Komko was a veteran of leadership programs in Salem, Ore., Albuquerque and Sandoval County. Those programs were already part of a nationwide growth pattern of independent community-based leadership organizations that had seen a groundswell of support since the early 1980s.

While organizations like Leadership Albuquerque were already in place to serve individual communities, there was no statewide program. The pair fleshed out the concept over coffee and tea on Sunday

mornings for a year. It all started with a literal blank sheet of paper.

"I love creating. I can't sit still. Starting with a blank sheet of paper is not frightening at all to me," says Komko.

She spent a week with Leadership North Carolina to learn about the challenges of building a state-wide initiative.

The first class came together in 1996. Komko had to be convinced to stay on as the head of Leadership New Mexico. She figured she had done her work in getting the organization off the ground. But then-Chairman of the Board Bob Simmons wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and all these years later, Komko is still piloting the program.

Leadership New Mexico doesn't create

leaders, but takes in existing leaders to teach them about the challenges facing the state and how they can work together to improve their communities.

"It's a knowledge-based program. To get in the program, you have to have a certain amount of demonstrated leadership already," says Walt Bolic, president of Delta Dental and a 2001 graduate of Leadership New Mexico.

Tuition runs \$3,500 per person, with some scholarships available. A highly competitive selection process for the organization's core program results in about 45 candidates per year taking part in a 10-month series of team-building exercises, seminars and field trips around the state.

Says Bolic, "I've been very impressed with how she took this entity from nothing to where it is today. The diversity and quality of the people who go through the program is just amazing."

It takes an unusual person to inspire New Mexico's CEOs, politicians and dairy farmers to carry snacks into meeting rooms and haul water coolers across the desert in their spare time.

The greatest testament to Komko's work is the number of alums who return as volunteers. It's not just for the glamor positions of giving speeches and running seminars, but also the nitty-gritty details that make everything tick.

Komko has climbed to the top of a shaky pole. A very real shaky pole. A team-building ropes course is one of the highlights of the start of each core program. At her office on Gold Avenue in downtown Albuquerque, she gladly shares the photo albums of some of New Mexico's top VIPs wearing hard hats and shorts and clinging

to the side of a 30-foot-tall wood pole. As she flips through the pages, she rattles off the names and positions of every person.

"One of the things that boggles my mind is that she knows everybody's name that has gone through the program. She has this talent. Everybody connects with her," says Los Alamos County Councilor Sharon Stover.

Stover is one of those alums who made it to the top of the pole and then kept climbing. In 2003, she helped to found Leadership Los Alamos, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing together leaders in the Los Alamos area.

"It took us about a year to get going and she held our hand the entire way to make sure we were going to build something that would meet Patty's standards," says Stover.

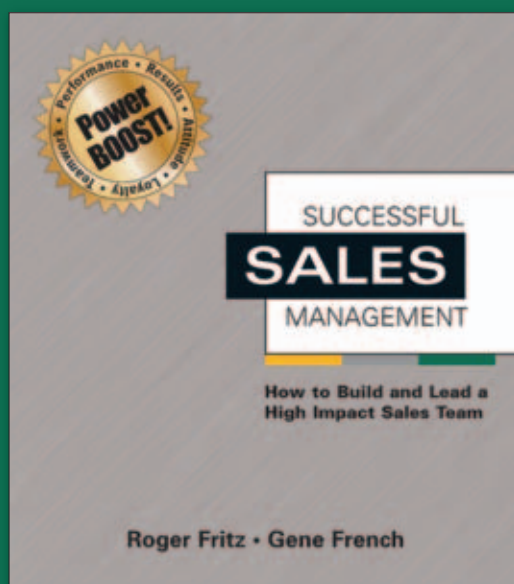
Komko often returns to her favorite blank sheets of paper to create fresh ideas. Leadership New Mexico has introduced additional programs designed for government leaders and young professionals. What keeps her going is that same desire for growth and exploration that she felt as a child.

"I get another master's degree in leadership every single year," she says.

She learns from each new class of program participants and the alumni that never really leave. That is the sort of fuel that keeps a leader like Komko going.

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