

## PROFILE

DOROTHY BULLITT:

## Building community one home at a time

By Jocelyn Milici

The Bullitt family has deep roots in the Pacific Northwest. Dorothy C. Bullitt (EMBA 1988), granddaughter of King Broadcasting founder Dorothy S. Bullitt, is no exception. Legendary namesake aside, she's made a name for herself in nearly every facet of the Seattle community—government, business, community service, civic leadership and now as executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Seattle and South King County.

Since taking the helm of Habitat's Seattle branch five years ago, Bullitt has created a governing board, engineered a merger with the South King County affiliate, introduced initiatives that emphasize construction safety and sustainable building practices, and substantially improved the organization's financial health. However, Bullitt is quick to credit staff, volunteers and Habitat families for the success. "My biggest achievement has been drawing people of tremendous talent to the organization, articulating a goal, and vesting them with the authority to accomplish goals on our behalf—getting results we could never afford."

Three innovative volunteer-run initiatives include: a mortgage program where payments are put into a fund that contributes to new mortgages and new housing; the Habitat Home Improvement Outlet, which will sell remnant building materials at a discount and apply the proceeds to construction costs; and Habitat's benefit breakfast, which has become a first-rate fundraising tool.



"The breakfast is an economical way to generate income," Bullitt says. "A volunteer event chair came on board and tripled income in one year. This last year it increased again to \$370,000 from 1,050 contributors. The breakfast is a vehicle to showcase what we're doing and who's involved, and it will continue to grow as we are more prominent. It's our signature event."

The signature element of Bullitt's eclectic curriculum vitae is leadership. Past posts include chief operating officer for family-owned Harbor Properties, Inc., assistant Washington state attorney general, president of Seattle Rotary, board member of the Bullitt Foundation and board member of the Foster School of Business Executive MBA Program.

Bullitt holds a BA in English and history from the University of Washington and a law degree from Boston University. She returned to the UW to earn an Executive MBA in 1988. "An MBA education is broad enough to let people land in different places," she says. "It has helped me in business, in my volunteer leadership and here at Habitat."

Under Bullitt's leadership, Habitat has increased the volume of volunteer-built new houses and "sweat equity" of partner families. The organization also has adopted new projects such as rehabilitation of existing homes, construction of multi-family complexes, and programs such as 21st Century Housing Challenge in Federal Way, where Habitat is collaborating with others to move an entire neighborhood out of poverty conditions.

Habitat is also becoming more sustainable through Bullitt's leadership. "We're not just building homes and leaving the keys," she says. "There's a lot more to it."

The organization has also begun giving homes conservation make-overs and replacing outdated appliances and lighting with modern, energy-efficient alternatives. And Habitat now trains family partners on home maintenance, landscaping, finance basics (including awareness of predatory lending), and dealing with the mysteries of homeowners' associations.

What does the future hold for Habitat? "We want a stream of land in the pipeline to allow for more planning," Bullitt says. "The Seattle Housing

Authority has been a great partner, as has the City of Seattle. We'd like to partner with private developers as well. We'll see how things go."

Bullitt adds that Habitat's biggest obstacles are access to land, funding to keep pace with rising construction costs, and resource allocation. "More people want to volunteer than we can manage," she admits. "So we try to figure out how our interests align and think creatively to find new ways for volunteers to advance the mission of Habitat."

Bullitt has been approached on several occasions to run for public office. While highly qualified, she has no plans to do so. "I get energy from deep individual relationships and I have a desire for balance. Those are hard to come by in politics. I've been asked to run for public office, but it just hasn't appealed to me."

Despite her influential family and leadership career, life hasn't always been easy for Bullitt. She's sustained some devastating losses. Her commitment to remain positive despite personal challenges brought forth for her first book, "Filling the Void: Six Steps from Loss to Fulfillment." Published in 1996, it quickly became a bestseller and was translated into Spanish, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish and Czech. "Other than being cathartic, it was exhilarating and the most creative experience I've ever had. I got inspired and the book came pouring out of me," recalls Bullitt.

"My approach with 'Filling the Void' was to write in a simple voice that would reach the broadest audience.

People in a state of grief have short attention spans. I've experienced that."

If her first book was a solitary exploration into a universal condition, her follow-up was a true partnership. In 1997 Bullitt teamed with extreme mountaineer Jim Wickwire to write "Addicted to Danger," his epic memoirs that became a national bestseller.

Bullitt may have another book in her, if the inspiration hits her. Whether or not she writes again, though, she is happy to share her wisdom with students at the Foster School of Business, as she did at commencement ceremonies in 1994 (MBA) and 2006 (undergrad). "I was intrigued and honored that the Business School would choose a not-for-profit person," she says. "It says a lot about the School—the recognition that there is value in a business education for many different career paths."

Bullitt's 2006 commencement address focused on the softer side of leadership: Showing up on time. Following through on commitments. Treating colleagues with courtesy, regardless of rank. Giving back to communities. All wise words worth remembering. ■