

Keynote Address – 2007 Southwest Colorado EPYCS Awards Ceremony

Allison Pease, Executive Director, Durango Nature Studies

Good evening and thank you for having me here tonight.

When Lauren Price called me to ask if I would be the keynote speaker tonight, my first question was, “Why me?” After all, I am just the executive director for a small non-profit here in Southwest Colorado.

Then I remembered that Lauren had heard me say on many occasions in the last year that I am a fan of the El Pomar EPYCS program. Thus, I reasoned, if you wanted to have someone speak at your event, why not stack the deck and ask someone who has said she is a fan of your program. So, well done, Lauren.

Yet, that’s what I would like to talk to you all about tonight - why I am a fan of EPYCS.

As the executive director for a nonprofit, I am *grateful* for EPYCS. The money we’ve received over the years has gone straight to programs and has helped Durango Nature Studies continue our mission of providing nature, science, and environmental education to the communities of Southwest Colorado.

Thus, as an executive director, I am *grateful* for EPYCS...but that’s not what makes me a fan.

Let me step back for a moment.

Last year, I served on the marketing committee for Rural Philanthropy Days of Southwest Colorado. In my role for that event, I was asked to write an Op Ed piece for the local newspapers. During the course of my research, I learned a lot about nonprofits and I’d like to share with you some of the things I discovered.

- Between 1997 and 2001, nonprofit employment grew at 2.5 percent and added more than 1 million jobs to the nation's economy.
- During the same period, business employment grew by 1.8 percent, while government employment grew at 1.6 percent.
- Over the last 25 years, nonprofit employment doubled and now includes more than 12.5 million jobs.
- In 2001, there were more than 1 million registered nonprofits in the U.S.
- The combined assets of U.S. nonprofits make the sector the sixth largest economy in the world - larger than Brazil, Russia, Canada, Mexico, and South Korea.
- In Colorado, by the end of 2005, nonprofits were reporting incomes of \$19.3 billion and assets of \$39.4 billion.
- Lastly, from 2002 to 2006, the number of nonprofits in Southwest Colorado increased 170 percent.

These are heady statistics. The reasons for such increases in the non-profit sector are important, but are the stuff of another speech.

What’s important is that these numbers demonstrate how increasingly important nonprofits are in addressing the needs and issues of their communities. These numbers also illustrate that there’s an enormous amount of money going in to and out of the nonprofit world, and that there are a lot of jobs involved.

More importantly, these stats show us that there are people involved who rely on the services and programs offered by non-profits. These are the services and programs that businesses and governments often can’t provide.

So, how do nonprofits get funding and why would anyone choose to give us money?

To answer that, let’s look at the difference between a non-profit and a for-profit business.

Let's say you have an idea for a widget. Maybe it's a computer program or some new kind of energy technology. Maybe your idea is even a global air filter. Whatever your idea, you decide that you are going to invest your time and your money into making a great widget. Your expectation is that at some point, you will get to buy a house, take a vacation, or even pay for your children's college education.

Now let's say other people get wind of your idea. They think your widget is a great idea and they want to invest in your success. As such, they give you money. This money is not a gift. It is a loan. Just like you, your investors hope that eventually they get a return on their investment.

So, if you are a business, you measure success by how many widgets you sell and if you and your investors get a return on their investment. Pretty simple, eh?

But what about non-profits?

The name alone is a clue. Non-profits don't sell widgets; they fulfill missions. As I look around the room tonight, I see great non-profits with incredible missions. These missions might address affordable housing, provide disaster relief, or offer education to those who are underprivileged.

Again, these non-profits aren't about making money; they are about fulfilling a mission.

So, how do nonprofits measure success? After all, we aren't selling a widget.

Most nonprofits would say that our measure of success is about quality of life. Whether our mission relates to the environment, to animals, or people in crisis, non-profits are about improving quality of life in our community. At the end of the day, we have to show that life is better for those we serve. That's a hard thing to do especially when we are asking for money.

Thus, we spend a lot of time talking to people, sending letters asking for membership dues, and writing long grant proposals to foundations.

For grant proposals to foundations and corporations, the process is arduous. Sometimes, we must demonstrate the value of our mission even before we've actually done anything. If we have an idea for a new program or service, we have to show that it is relevant and needed in our community. That's a tall order when we are talking about demonstrating quality of life.

Our proposals and grants requests often go to foundations and corporations with trustees or directors whom we don't know. These are people with lots of experience in business, in finance, and in life. They are people who can vote, buy a house, and sign contracts. These are people who are entrusted with making sure that a foundation fulfills its mission and that the foundation gives money to those non-profits that meet the foundation's guidelines.

Yet...

These are often people don't live here, don't work here, and sometimes aren't completely familiar with what is important here.

You see the problem our problem, right? The ongoing dilemma of a rural non-profit?

But...

What if there was a program that allowed a certain segment of our population to make decisions about awarding money based on where they lived?

What if that program then asked this segment of people – people who can't vote, who can't buy a house, and who aren't yet experienced in business or finance – to decide what they thought was important?

What if that program asked these same people – the ones who will one day in the future vote, buy a home, or create a widget – to come together, look at the needs of their neighbors, draft a mission, raise some money, and then serve as trustees to make sure that, in a few short months, money got into the hands of non-profits in their communities?

What if that same program said to these people, “We don’t want you to wait until you can vote or buy a house. We don’t want you to wait until you have business or financial experience. We want you to act now.”

Well, you’ve all guessed it. There is such a program. EPYCS.

By asking you to take a hard look at your community, to make decisions about what you think is important, and to award grants to the non-profits that fulfill your mission, EPYCS has empowered you by saying,

“You are not going to be our future someday. You are, in fact, our now.”

And, that’s why I’m a fan of EPYCS.

So, to all of you here tonight...the teachers and parents, interested community members and the press, trustees and fellows of El Pomar, recipients of tonight’s awards, and the students...

As an executive director who is grateful to EPYCS for the awards my organization has received, as the mother of two children who I hope will one day participate in the EPYCS program, and especially as a community member whose life is made better each day by the work of all of you do now...

Thank you and congratulations to you all.

Allison Pease