

Life > Style & Fashion > Women's Style

Jennet Robinson Alterman is passionate about empowering women (Photos)

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Jennet and Dr. Bowles (Center for Women Archives)

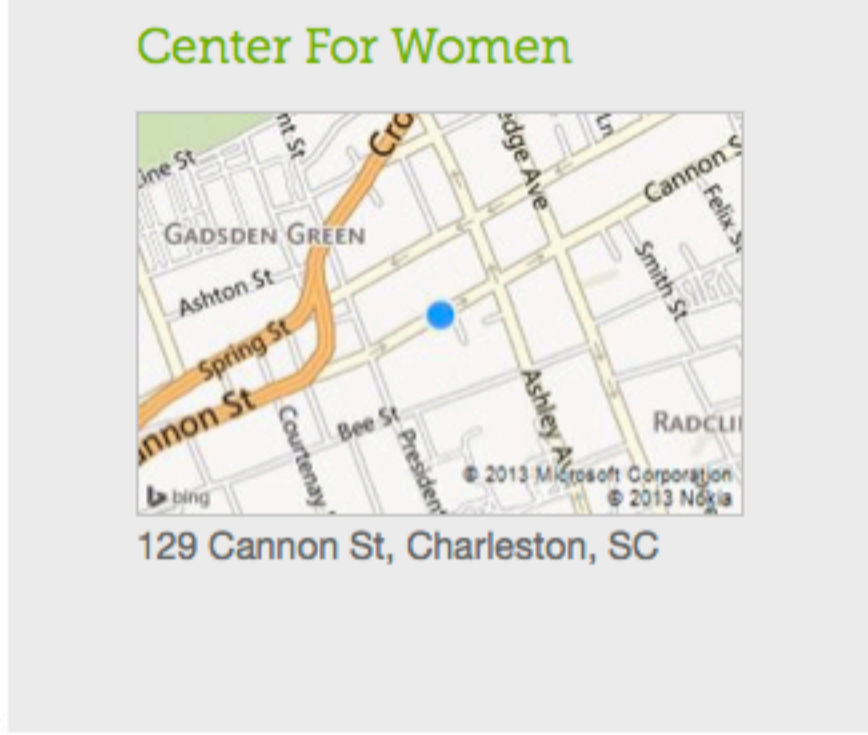
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December 19, 2011 Like 0

Jennet Robinson Alterman's passion for empowering women led her in 2001 to accept the position of Executive Director of the Charleston, South Carolina [Center for Women](#). The Center is the largest women's membership organization in South Carolina. It is an organization that helps women succeed every day both professionally and personally. Programs center on business building and leadership as well as life transitions. Under her leadership, the Center conducted 108 programs in 2011 and reached over 6000 women in the Lowcountry. In 2005, the Center received the Award for Excellence in Non-Profit Management from the South Carolina Association of Non-Profit Organizations. The Center was also honored in 2009 with the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce 1773 award for the Public/Non-Profit Sector and People Against Rape's Outstanding Victim Service Program Award. Oprah Winfrey recognized the Center's efforts with an Oprah's Angel Network grant in 2006.

Jennet is passionate about empowering women and improving communication between women of diverse ethnic, national, religious and racial backgrounds. A positive energy flows from her. It is not just self-confidence in herself but also her confidence in the abilities of others. I first meet Jennet, in 2002 when I was working for a Charleston non-profit organization whose focus was on workforce development and provided soft-skill training and clothing to women transitioning from welfare, prison and substance abuse programs. Jennet facilitated cooperation and coordination between my organization and a similar organization in North Charleston. She did this at a time when cooperation between local non-profit organizations was rare.

She has an extensive background in international development having served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Afghanistan from 1977 to 1979, Peace Corps Country Director in Swaziland from 1987 to 1990 and the Interagency Coordinator for Peace Corps worldwide from 1990 to 1996.



In a 2002 interview, Jennet told Post and Courier reporter Mindy Spar that when she was 12 years old, she announced to her father, that she was going to be a medical missionary. "Why don't you join the Peace Corps?" he asked. Twelve years later after graduating from Mary Baldwin Women's College, she was offered a job with WCSC-TV. She quickly realized that journalism did not interest her but the art of communication did. She then followed her father's advice and joined the Peace Corps. Her first assignment was in Afghanistan. This is where her passion to empower women originated.

Jennet grew up in a theatrical family surrounded by a diverse and creative group of people. Theatre is unique in that it allows the crossing of ethnic, racial, political and class boundaries. In Jennet's own words. "Theater is the great equalizer." Gender is not an issue in community theatre. It only becomes an issue in the upper echelons of the commercial entertainment industry. The reality that being a woman could be considered a disadvantage hit her in college. As a student in the 1970's, she was chosen with nine other young women from women's colleges to participate in an experiment at the all male Davidson College. The goal was to determine whether women could handle the academic work. A history professor told her there was no way she was going to pass his class. None of the ten women received a grade below a B despite obvious opposition from some of the teaching staff. This experience made her aware of the inequalities women face.

This experience served her well when in 1980 as the press secretary for Nancy Stevenson, South Carolina's first female Lieutenant Governor she came up against the "old boy network". The female staff members formed a peer and support group, similar to what the Center for Women does today.

In Afghanistan as a member of the [Peace Corp](#), she was given the task of educating and implementing new health care procedures among the poorer population. The challenges she faced were an uneducated population that could not read, rampant dysentery and lack of clean water. Her love of communication and passion for empowering women enabled her to find simple and practical solutions to these daunting problems. She designed a pamphlet using pictures instead of words, and taught the villagers how to build mud stoves to boil water.

Being illiterate also didn't mean that Afghan women weren't smart and Jennet saw how quickly they adapted their behaviors when given timely information about health issues. This is a good example of how the desire to learn and experience different cultures and make things happen to improve the lives of those less-fortunate especially women is a theme that runs through Jennet's life. Her passion in life is not just community service, but empowering women.

One of the great lessons Jennet learned was in supporting micro-enterprise programs for women in third world countries. She saw firsthand how a family and a community could be transformed when women were given the opportunity to generate revenue. Micro loans were used to help a woman create a cash flow, which she then dedicated to health care and education for her children. In 2011, the Center for Women was chosen by the U.S. Small Business Administration to receive a grant to create the South Carolina Women's Business Center. Over the next 4 to 5 years women all over the state will receive technical support and business counseling to aid them in starting and growing businesses. This program is a prime example of how she uses her love of communication and passion for community service and the empowerment of women in practical programs that enhance the lives of others.

Jennet's life goal is to be a powerful force in achieving [gender equality](#). Through the Center for Women, she hopes to make personal and professional success an everyday occurrence in the lives of the women in her community.

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