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Helping Women Succeed, One by One

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Jennet Robinson Alterman's excitement came across clearly through the phone.

The Center for Women in South Carolina had secured Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and New York Times columnist Nicolas Kristoff as the speaker for a luncheon Thursday in honor of Women's History Month. Kristoff, who co-wrote *Half the Sky – Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, will talk about how to fight poverty and repression by empowering women and girls.



Alterman is executive director of the Center for Women. Her background includes working on behalf of women in the Peace Corps and other aid agencies. Speaking to her, her passion for her work is self-evident. "I can go on and on about how South Carolina has a lot of issues around women. It's 50th in the nation in terms in women in the state Legislature," she says. "There aren't any women in our congressional delegation. One-third of households are headed by single moms. We have a high teenage pregnancy rate, and we're among the top 10 states when it comes to women who are killed by a partner."

Alterman is out to change that.

"I'm a native South Carolinian. I feel very strongly that women in this state should have equality and be empowered economically," she says.

What makes Alterman's center a success, she says, "is what we're not." She continues: "We're not a shelter, we're not a crisis center, we don't do medical and we don't pay overdue bills. What we do is help women succeed personally and professionally."

Among the center's programs:

1. A brown bag lunch series on topics ranging from getting through a divorce to picking plants at the nursery
2. A seminar series on women and power, with experts who talk about how to get ahead
3. Seminars on women's leadership
4. A women writers' forum on both the art and business of writing.
5. The center also instituted a job search program in 2008, when it started getting calls from women who hadn't had to look for a job for years. "We recruited job coaches and did workshops on job search strategy and resume writing." In addition, once a month, women come by and network with one another at a job help drop-in.



Kristoff's appearance is just one more feather in the center's cap. Recently, the center received a five-year, \$750,000 grant from the Small Business Administration to create the South Carolina Business Center, now up and running. The new center is part of a nationwide SBA network that helps women set up and grow small businesses. Initially, it will service Charleston, Berkeley and Dorchester counties. But if Alterman has her way, it will eventually extend its reach throughout the state.

The two organizations together provide a holistic approach to starting and growing a business. For example, women who want to expand their business have to deal with work/life balance. The Center for Women has counselors on staff who can help women deal with that issue, among others.

Begun in 1990, the center largely comprised counseling and support groups for women who felt they were victims. When Alterman came on board in 2001, the organization was in the throes of rethinking its mission. Now it's a center for women in transition. "No victims walk into this building," Alterman emphasized, "only women who want to make it to the next level of success."

Alterman's advice for women who want to succeed:

1. Understand that work/life balance is a daily compromise with yourself," Alterman says. "Once you get over the fact that you can't do it all and do it well, you're going to be much happier with yourself."
2. The bottom line: "Did anyone lose life or limb because you didn't get through your to-do list?" Alterman asks herself. Alterman recalls being in Kabul, Afghanistan, for the first Russian-backed coup. That's when she learned not to sweat the small stuff. "Keep it in context," she says.
3. Alterman also notes that work/life balance changes for every age and every stage. "If you're married with young kids, you just have to embrace the chaos," she advises. On the other hand, she adds, "When you're in your 50s, you have to understand that working out five days a week isn't necessary."

* * * * *

FOUNDER'S NOTE: *I was lucky enough to meet Jennet a few years ago; her work – helping to empower women from all walks of life in the Charleston area – is truly an inspiration! If you are looking for a worthy outlet to make a donation to, which has a direct and positive impact in bettering women's lives, think of the Center for Women. I was lucky enough to be invited to deliver several marketing workshops for them a few years ago – a fulfilling & fabulous experience!*

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