

Women Who Mean Business honoree: Karen Alvord



Karen Alvord is the CEO of Lilliput Families. DENNIS MCCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

By Danielle Starkey – Correspondent Jun 23, 2017

While still in her 20s and in graduate school, Karen Alvord and her new husband suddenly became parents of four children. Ages 3, 7, 9 and 11, the children were her older sister's kids. The young couple needed either to take the children in or watch them go into foster care due to her sister's chronic substance abuse.

"We just knew they needed a place and didn't want them to be in foster care," said Alvord, whose family has since grown to seven children.

The experience helped shape Alvord's career. She has devoted herself for the past 27 years to Lilliput Families, a nonprofit that aims to find lifelong families for children in the foster care system.

Alvord has been the nonprofit's CEO since 2006, working her way up from social worker, program director and assistant director.

Alvord has had other challenges thrust on her — including undergoing several spinal surgeries when she was a child, and the deaths of her parents when she was a sophomore in college. Those experiences taught her to be resilient, Alvord said. They also help her be compassionate when she hears what some foster children go through as they grow up without a stable family.

But passion alone didn't help grow Lilliput from a nonprofit with a \$3.6 million budget in 2009 to one that has about 150 employees and a \$12.5 million budget today. To achieve that, Alvord said she had to be an innovator and change agent.

Those skills are evident in Alvord's success securing a \$1.25 million federal grant in 2009, which was matched by local contributions. That sum was a game changer for Lilliput.

Alvord said that she watched carefully as the federal government began to shift gears in an effort to keep children with their families rather than farm them out to foster homes. She was ready when funding was released and up for grabs.

"We were right there" with a grant application, she said.

The main goal of the so-called demonstration grant was to focus on finding, contacting and engaging family members using all the resources at their disposal, and to find them early on, as soon as possible after the children enter the foster system. "Forty-four percent of youth identified as not having families (in Lilliput's service area) actually did," she said.

"At Lilliput, we've always been driven to be leaders in our field and be ahead of the game. We're always looking for gaps and solutions before someone else does."

Carroll Schroeder, executive director of the California Alliance of Child and Family Services, credits Alvord with carving out a niche in providing foster care and adoption services, and in ensuring the families take hold.

"Often, once the adoption is completed, there's a rush of good feeling. A year or two later, it's, 'Oh, my God. They've got problems,'" Schroeder said. "Lilliput is there for them."

When Alvord was board president of the California alliance, she was always "dead honest, really straightforward, (and) she's got the stories and the numbers right at her fingertips," he said.

Kierstan DeLong, board chairwoman of Lilliput, said she's rarely met anyone who is as driven and unassuming as Alvord.

"She's very modest, very humble," DeLong said. "She's genuinely connected to the mission of Lilliput, she knows the industry in and out, and she's developed business acumen on the job. She always wants to do better and to outdo herself."

Last year alone, Lilliput arranged 762 adoptions, more than any other private adoption agency in California. The nonprofit has 11 offices in Northern California, stretching from Redding to Stockton.

In addition to her work at Lilliput, Alvord and her husband, Scott, who recently was elected to the Roseville City Council, owned A Dash of Panache. They ran the teahouse for more than a decade. Although they sold the business last year, Alvord said she can see herself opening a coffee house again someday. "The best part is meeting people," she said.

Age: 37

Education: Bachelor's in social work, Pacific Union College; master's in social work, California State University Sacramento; MBA, North Park University in Chicago

Family: Husband and seven children, lives in Roseville

First job: Foster's Freeze

Advice to younger women: "Spend less time worrying about things you can't change, and change the things you can."

Biggest whoops: "I wish we would have done more traveling abroad before we became parents."

Favorite way to unwind: "I love a book — especially crime dramas and mysteries."

Fantasy career: "Having a little local coffee shop and getting to meet new people. No food, no employees — just coffee and customers."

Person you'd most like to meet: Michelle Obama

Something about you that would surprise people: "Because we have seven children, every once in a while, I think I still may have it in me to take in a teenager or young adult."