



2010 Reunion Quilt



# Women's Health Leadership

Past, Present, and Future

Center for Collaborative Planning, Public Health Institute

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## SUPPORT AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the WHL alumni and stakeholders for your valuable stories and insights throughout the assessment process. We are also grateful for the generous support of:

- Highpoints Consulting Services, who designed and helped facilitate the Appreciative Inquiry process and key person interviews;
- Sierra Health Foundation who hosted our 15 Year Reunion; and,
- The California Wellness Foundation, who provided grant funding to support assessment activities and publication of this report.

### **Our Mission:**

**To Promote Health and Social Justice by Supporting Grassroots Women Leaders**

## INTRODUCTION

*“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”*  
–Martin Buber

Dear Friends,

It has been an amazing journey these past 15 years so filled with courageous conversations, healing laughter, and circles of community that have become the trademark of Women’s Health Leadership. As I struggle to convey just the right words, conjure up just the right image, and tell just the right story, perhaps the only words that needs to be said are my sincere thanks for the work that we have accomplished together in the past, are doing in the present, and hope to do in the future. We hope you will enjoy a brief pause in your day to contemplate what we might think of as the “zen” of WHL and to celebrate the people who have contributed to its success.

In gratitude,

Connie Chan Robison  
Executive Director, WHL

*“Show up or choose to be present. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning. Tell the truth without blame or judgment. Be open to outcome, not attached to the outcome.”*  
–Angeles Arrien, *The Four-Fold Way*

## WHL: SUPPORTING WOMEN FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

We believe that effective change must begin at the community level, and that women are critical partners and prime movers in this endeavor. The primary goal of WHL is to improve the health status of low-income communities in California. The program accomplishes this through supporting the leadership capacity of women who are already making a difference in their communities but want to have greater impact.



*“I felt more empowered and confident about my ability as a leader.”*

–WHL Alumni

Though the scope of the program has varied over the 15 years, the factors that make WHL work have remained constant. Since 1994, we have offered training, technical assistance, peer learning and mentoring opportunities to women leaders through a leadership school, alumni network and special projects. The year-long leadership school provides a supportive, cross cultural environment for grassroots women to participate in trainings and peer-learning sessions at quarterly meetings. These provide an anchor for participants to complete leadership development plans and projects. Core development areas include: women's health, organizational development, leadership development, and policy and advocacy.

Over 350 alumni from the program can share resources and opportunities via a listserv. Periodic reunions bring the classes together to reflect and rejuvenate. Special projects such as Women's Choices and WHL Action re-engage alumni in work to improve healthcare quality and strengthen leadership within nonprofit organizations respectively. WHL San Joaquin Valley engages nonprofit women leaders from the Central Valley of California to strengthen the network of nonprofit organizations and leaders in the region.

“I discovered that I can make a difference and that my voice has value.”

-WHL Alumni



## PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Approaching WHL's 15 year milestone, we decided it was time to assess where we have been and where we are going. We also wanted to reconnect with alumni, culminating in a 15 year reunion to engage program participants in reflection and celebration.

The specific goals for our assessment were to:

- Better understand the impact of WHL in its 15 year history
- Identify assets/strengths of WHL and potential for innovation
- Assess WHL's relevance to 21st Century leaders and leadership skills

Wanting to engage stakeholders in a variety of ways both convenient to participants and as a strategy to cull different kinds of data, we utilized four processes: survey, Appreciative Inquiry interviews, key person interviews, and discussions at the reunion.

## SURVEY

A short online survey was emailed to a listserv that reaches 200 alumni and WHL stakeholders. 34 people responded to the survey. Specific objectives for the survey were to identify:

- Where WHL had the greatest impact for program participants
- The "must have" WHL program tools and processes important to carry into the future
- Areas of work important for WHL to consider as part of 3-5 year strategic plan
- Highpoint experiences of participants during their WHL journey.



## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY INTERVIEWS

WHL Alumni were invited to participate in a training on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and to subsequently use this process to reflect on their experiences with WHL. AI is the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best and is used world-wide in public, non-profit and for-profit sectors to transform thinking and actions. It offers a powerful tool for organizational development, especially in times of transition and renewal. After AI training activities, alumni formed pairs to interview each other using AI techniques and questions. This work resulted in five alumni submitting their interviews as part of the assessment process.

“The WHL experience impressed upon me the importance of ritual and storytelling. On October 22, a national day of protest of police brutality, 5 or 6 members of my WHL class joined me on stage before dinner to read the names of some of the victims of police brutality. Being in that space with such powerful women spurred me to action, as opposed to simply talking and theorizing. It helped me to understand that it's up to individuals to take action, even if it's outside the program.”

-WHL Alumni

## KEY PERSON INTERVIEWS

We engaged Highpoints Consulting Services (HPC), to design, conduct and analyze key person interviews with WHL stakeholders. HPC conducted seven stakeholder interviews. Of these seven, five are original Steering Committee members who helped to shape the program's structure and activities and/or served as faculty mentors. The remaining are long-time supporters who have served in capacities such as speakers, trainers, donors and advisors. We identified two funders for interviews, but, due to interviewees' personal circumstances, these were not conducted.

The interview consisted of questions on the following four topics:

1. Program Impact: Personal, Institutional, Community Leadership
2. Tools, Processes, Practices: What has worked? What should be added?
3. Emerging Future: Program Content, Possible Constituencies, Support
4. Continued WHL Involvement

## REUNION DISCUSSIONS

Alumni and other friends of WHL gathered together for the 15 year reunion celebration on September 25, 2011 at the Sierra Health Foundation. After a presentation on early assessment findings, participants engaged in world café discussions around four key themes that emerged from assessment data gathered during interviews and the survey: engaging alumni, building new partnerships, marketing, and new and relevant content/approaches.



## FINDINGS

Women who participate in WHL see it as a transformative experience, one that not only leads to personal change, but also organizational and community change. Years after they leave the program, it continues to impact their lives. The program's impact and influence is grounded in its unique approach, methods and tools.

“I have a picture of me coming off of family leave holding a tiny baby in my arms there on the Senate Floor. It was so empowering to look out into the gallery to see the women—middle class, working poor, women of color—sitting in seats of power. It's what government should be about. These are the women who probably have relied on government for their well-being. And there they were, looking like they were feeling, “I belong.” Kathryn Hall did a naming ceremony for my baby, right there. And just to put it in context, he is a foster adopted child born to a mother addicted to crack cocaine. And there we all were in the place where the decisions about babies like him are made. That's my aha moment.

-WHL Stakeholder

Several respondents also offered suggestions for WHL's future, ways in which the program could be enhanced. Outlined below are the highlights of what works, how the program impacts its participants, and areas for future development.

## WHAT WORKS

Respondents repeatedly identified the following tools and processes as effective with women leaders:

1. Personal story telling, especially as facilitated in small groups using the STORI circle process
2. An emphasis on nurturing—taking care of self and others
3. Incorporating the personal and spiritual into the professional, including use of ritual. WHL encourages women to bring their whole selves to their work
4. Creating a safe space to take risks, stretch and grow, as in the small learning groups facilitated by women mentors who were already established leaders
5. Focusing on a collaborative leadership model

Quarterly retreats, which served as an anchor and venue for the above processes, were also noted as effective, along with communication tools such as the alumni and learning group listservs and conference calls. The alumni listserv is especially important as a networking tool. Individual learning plans and/or projects were also noted as useful means of experimenting, sparking creativity, and practicing new skills.



In addition to the collaborative leadership curriculum, policy and advocacy was a topic often mentioned as valuable. Participants noted the Legislative Day spent at the Capitol in Sacramento as particularly powerful. Women in the program sit in the seats of policymakers as they learn about the legislative process.

“STORI Circle – this activity stand out more than anything in her mind. The circle gave her a space of safety and she found unconditional acceptance and affirmation from her WHL sisters. This was a transformative experience. It allowed her to take a leadership role. She began to see herself as a leader with experience in the area of mid-life changes.”

–WHL Interviewer

## GREATEST IMPACT

At a minimum, participants felt the program helped increase their confidence and feelings of empowerment. Several women noted that the program's impact was greatest in the area of relationship development as they made long lasting, powerful connections with other women leaders. Participants noted that they gained skills, established better working relationships, embraced risk taking and followed their dreams as a result of the program. Many alumni were promoted or changed careers because of their participation in WHL.

Beyond their own personal development, participants felt they had an increased ability to empower others, build successful coalitions or collaborations, and engage in the political process.

One interviewee remarked that the statewide impact of WHL comes from the realization of two program goals: increasing the number of women community leaders in California and helping the leaders move into leadership positions. "The impact has been across the continuum," she said. "WHL alumni are dispersed all over the state from political leadership positions to program officers for funders."

“When everything came together at the end of the year, you could see the change, how much they had grown. They had increased confidence and increased creativity. There was so much joy at the graduations, so much beauty. That stayed with me. Especially because many of the women had been without resources and some had had very little hope.

-WHL Stakeholder



## CONTINUED INFLUENCE

Years after participants leave the program, WHL continues to impact their lives. Alumni perceived the following influences beyond the program year:

- Increased confidence to do their work differently, develop new programs, change positions, and pursue new degrees and careers
- Inspiration to pass the torch of leadership, encouraging and empowering others
- Maintaining active relationships and collaborations with other alumni
- Benefiting from ongoing networking with other alumni

The statewide alumni network is probably the greatest continued influence. It is visible, viable and active. Not only does it house important, lasting relationships, people who are affiliated with WHL have a special bond even before they meet. One interviewee noted, “The ‘sweet spot’ is the affinity of the WHL alums. It’s like a sorority. Once women identify as WHL, they have instant bonding. They have a sense of playing well with others and a shared sense of intimacy. WHL creates a body of people who can just see each other and get right down to work. This is essential to the kind of organizing we do.”

## THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

Ideas for where WHL can grow fell into four categories:

- Engaging alumni
- New content, approaches, and audiences
- Marketing
- Building new partnerships



## ENGAGING ALUMNI

Many alumni want to continue to be connected to the program in meaningful ways. They want to help contribute to the program financially, as mentors to new participants, and as speakers or trainers. They would like to have easier methods of connecting with one another virtually and in person. Suggestions for weekend retreats, five year reunions, regional meetings, regular conference calls/webinars and a WHL Facebook page were consistent. Requests were also made for an updated and more user friendly alumni directory.

“There’s almost a secret handshake among alumni and those of us who have been involved in WHL. So many times over the years I have found myself in a situation where the WHL connection is recognized and there’s an immediate rebonding, a powerful sense of connection that continues.

~WHL Stakeholder

## NEW CONTENT, APPROACHES AND AUDIENCES

The following content areas were suggested as additions to the regular WHL curriculum. If they are already a part of the curriculum, it was recommended that they receive more attention:

- Conflict resolution
- Research methods
- Grant writing
- Self-care/wellness/meditation
- Nonprofit sustainability: succession planning, microenterprise, business concepts
- Negotiation rather than mediation
- Working across sectors
- Understanding and navigating power dynamics (gender, race)
- Mentorship (how to be a good mentor, how to find a good mentor)
- Specific health issues such as mental health, substance abuse



Suggestions for shifting the program approach varied from different ways of meeting to engaging new audiences and revisiting the WHL vision. The following approaches were suggested:

- Convening program participants at larger conferences and smaller weekend retreats
- Going beyond the policy and advocacy curriculum, participants could create an advocacy agenda and the program could take on an advocacy role
- Changing the audience focus, possibly for special projects, to girls, young women and emerging (rather than established) leaders
- Using processes in which participants more directly develop the curriculum, such as open space technology

“[WHL gave] me the skills and confidence to lead as well as set boundaries, take risks and follow dreams.

~WHL Alumni

- Team rather than individual community health projects
- While some respondents argued that WHL should think bigger, to convene powerful women and men leaders to take a new look at the challenges of the next 10 years, or to look at global possibilities, others encouraged the program to maintain its unique niche

## MARKETING

In addition to developing a focused argument for what WHL offers and revisiting the program branding, respondents encouraged the program to make better use of technology such as webinars, Facebook, Twitter, and videos on YouTube. Alumni noted that they should be more engaged in marketing the program.



“My aha moment came at every graduation I attended when the women really understood and could articulate their leadership potential, and I knew they would be able to implement their leadership goals. I still feel that way when I receive WHL materials. WHL models the way. It has become the organization that has a voice and has helped create the vision for women leaders in California.”

-WHL Stakeholder

## BUILDING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Whether for sustainability or continued program development, recommendations for new partnerships were:

- Local associations to provide higher education scholarships for WHL graduates
- Formal higher education programs
- Women’s associations
- Other grassroots non-profits
- Sabbatical programs
- National health organizations: heart, breast cancer, diabetes
- Create asset map of organizations that alumni are a part of and engage as new partners

## MOVING FORWARD

It is clear from these findings that WHL continues to resonate with grassroots women leaders. The program is relevant, unique and essential. Based on these findings, over the next two years WHL staff will seek resources and begin implementation in the areas of:

- Foster greater alumni engagement
- Provide leadership development opportunities to girls and young women
- Continue the year-long statewide leadership school

Work in these areas has already begun. In the months following data collection, WHL explored social media techniques to reconnect with alumni and officially launched our Facebook page. Also, we have received funding for a special project of WHL: It's My Future Initiative (MyFI), which will engage young women in Sacramento County in a leadership development program. Girls ages 12-17 will participate in a county wide coalition to reduce youth substance abuse by funding neighborhood-based projects. Finally, we continue to provide the WHL program to San Joaquin Valley non-profit women leaders through the Community Leadership Project, a joint effort funded by The David and Lucile Packard, James Irvine, and William and Flora Hewlett foundations. In 2012 this program will expand to cover the counties of San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern.

We invite you to stay tuned as WHL explores future directions and opportunities. In the years ahead, we look forward to telling the stories of many more women whose passion and work continue to change the world.

“After the WHL program I ended up pursuing a career in medicine and am now an MD at UCSF. WHL has given me skills in mentoring others, working with community, and advocating for underserved populations.”

-WHL Alumni

