

The Jefferson Award: Linda Mornell offers Summer Search



Each week, *The Chronicle* features a Bay Area resident who has won a Jefferson Award for making a difference in his or her community. The awards are administered by the American Institute for Public Service, a national foundation established in 1972 to honor community service. Bay Area residents profiled in *The Chronicle* will also be featured on CBS5-TV and KCBS-AM, which – along with *The Chronicle* – are Jefferson Award media partners.

By Suzanne Pullen
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Bay Area Jefferson Award winner: Linda Mornell, founder of Summer Search Foundation, a national nonprofit in San Francisco that provides scholarships for low-income youth to attend experiential summer programs.

How she started: In 1990, Mornell was working as a psychiatric nurse when her teenage daughter went on a rigorous summer trip with Outward Bound, an international organization known for its transformative educational wilderness expeditions. “Her M.O. was ‘I can’t,’ she was afraid of heights, of the dark,” said Mornell. “She came back with a nickname they had given her, ‘Sara-Can.’” Mornell saw the value of similar experiential trips, but soon realized how few minority and low-income students were enrolled in the expensive programs. She began asking San Francisco school teachers to nominate students they thought would benefit from such experiences. She then solicited scholarships from Outward Bound and

similar programs. The first year, 14 students received scholarships from 10 different programs.

And now: Although the students had amazing summer experiences, Mornell said they came back to the same limited environments they had left. “One intervention is not helpful. No one person or one organization makes a difference to an at-risk kid. You have to have a sustained intervention.” Summer Search now begins working with students in their sophomore year of high school, offering two summer programs, weekly mentoring and college counseling for seniors. It also offers a professional internship for college students. More than 600 students a year nationwide participate in 76 different programs – which provide \$800,000 in scholarships – in San Francisco, Petaluma, Boston, New York and Seattle. A new office is due to open in September in San Jose. More than 2,000 students have participated since 1990; 93 percent have gone on to college and 89 percent graduate.

Her inspiration: “Many of our kids, who come from generations of poverty, haven’t had tangible experiences of being suc-

cessful and can sabotage themselves,” said Mornell. She saw herself in some of the kids who had grown up with few opportunities and addiction issues their families.

Her vitals: Mornell, 52, lives with her husband, Pierre, in Bolinas. She has three children and four grandchildren. She received her nursing degree in Indiana and got her psychiatric nursing experience at the University of California at San Francisco.

Her hero: “I read compulsively when I was younger about Eleanor Roosevelt,” said Mornell. “She had buck teeth and so did I, so that created a special bond.” Mornell said she was inspired by Roosevelt’s achievement, as well as her vulnerability.

Who made the biggest impact on her: While she loves all the program’s kids, Solaria Perez stands out for Mornell. “I am terribly proud of Solaria,” she said. “Her life was so limited in the beginning, and she has created a limitless new life for herself.” Perez always wanted to be a leader, but the only way she had known how was in a gang. After Perez attended a summer enrichment

program at Cornell University, she gave a speech about her feelings of transformation to a group of 300 Summer Search participants at an event in Oakland. “She said that she had gotten a lot of pressure to return to the gang from other members,” said Mornell. “But she said ‘no, I have a life now.’ That takes quite a bit of courage.” Perez graduated from Harvard Business School in the class of 2005.

In her own words: “These kids show courage and take such huge risks in participating in these programs. These kids are going off with kids from other economic, ethnic and scholastic backgrounds. Many times, they are the only poor kids and the only minorities. We are very tough on our kids – we insist they drive their own progress in the program or take responsibility for their lack of progress. The trips are great, but the mentoring is where the real change takes place. The regular access to a sympathetic adult is where the kids really do change and transform themselves. We are providing models of success and leadership in schools for communities where it is increasingly rare or absent.”

What others say about her: “There is no judgment with Linda,” said Christine Capacillo, who was a 16-year-old Summer Search student from Balboa High School in 1993. “She says it’s not about right or wrong, but why. Find it in yourself or in your family background about why



JERRY TELFER / *The Chronicle*

Linda Mornell founded a summer program for needy youth.

you are acting or reacting the way you do, then decide what you are going to do about it.” Capacillo said Summer Search gave her the time away from the racial tensions she faced in school. She graduated from UCLA in 2000 and now the 28-year-old Filipina works as the alumni director for Summer Search. “The relationship Linda has with students goes against the grain,” she said. “She helps us learn how to embrace our struggle. It’s kind of funny

that it’s coming from a white woman from Marin, but she is helping us to look at our history to find a way forward.”

To find out more: Call (415) 362-0500 or visit www.summersearch.org

Nominate someone:

Do you know someone who deserves to be honored for community service? Go to www.sfgate.com/jeffersonawards.