

# BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE | MELISSA MACDONNELL

## Solid foundation

MELISSA MACDONNELL TACKLES TOUGH SOCIAL ISSUES, ON AND OFF THE JOB

Ask Melissa MacDonnell what she wanted to be when she grew up and she'll tell you: exactly what she's doing now

"Since I learned about the foundation world, I always wanted to be a foundation president," she says of her focus since she was a few years out of college. That journey includes positions at the former Bank of New England Foundation and Fleet Financial group before joining the Liberty Mutual Foundation in 2000. It provides funding to organizations in Boston, Seattle and the Dallas area (locations where Liberty Mutual has its largest U.S. offices) concentrating in three program areas: accessibility for people living with disabilities, education for children in low-income communities, and security for people who are homeless.

MacDonnell has volunteered and served on the boards of numerous nonprofits with goals mirroring that of her day job, including Horizons for Homeless Children, the Sudanese Community Center, the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, Rosie's Place, Big Sister Association, Whittier Street Health Center, and the United Way and Bruce Wall Ministries. The fourth of 11 children, MacDonnell grew up in Waltham until age 5 and lives there today. She spoke with Business Journal correspondent Robin Washington.



**How do you tell the difference between all your volunteer activities and your day job?**

It all becomes part of a lifestyle. There is a lot of merging; serving on a board might be more from my professional capacity, whereas going out and doing one-on-one volunteering is more of an individual thing, like being a Big Sister or tutoring Sudanese women.

**The Sudanese program: is that related to Gloria White-Hammond's (school for girls) in Sudan?**

She's the one who connected me with this group. My Little Sister was no longer little — she just turned 30 and got married last month — and I wanted to do some straight volunteering. In most cases, it's the wives of the Lost Boys. I spent time with one woman who wanted to learn how to drive. She didn't know English very well and she had to take the driver's test. Now she can drive and she has her independence.

### ▶ THE INFLUENCE FACTOR

**Did you have mentors along the way in your career?** One of my greatest mentors was my mom. (Also,) Gloria White-Hammond is definitely a woman who I've spent a great deal of time with. There's Karen Morton at Liberty and David Long, John Hamill when I was at Fleet.

**Who do you turn to for advice today?** Karen Morton; she's just a wise counsel. David Long has a great deal of intelligence and humor. Gloria White-Hammond just lives her beliefs so beautifully. That's how I want to live.

**Melissa M. MacDonnell, outside the Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester, one of the many BPS schools Liberty Mutual Foundation supports.**



**You're talking about driving in Boston. You did explain to her people drive offensively here?**

Good point. It's not easy for anybody.

**What's a program you've found most moving?**

We just made a million-dollar grant to More Than Words (in the South End, and in Waltham.) It gives young people an opportunity to develop job skills.

**What doesn't work? What are some mistakes people have made trying to address some of the tough social issues you focus on?**

A mistake that's very common is failing to listen to the young person who has been homeless. It's very important to listen to the voice of the young person so that it's incorporated into the programing.

**So many of the activities you're involved in and the people you mentioned are African American. That really shouldn't be notable but in this society, it is — to have friends that don't look like you.**

I think I've had the honor and the privilege of being around really exceptional people. In fact, I

don't think I named anyone who looks like me. I wouldn't have made that observation on my own.

**With your volunteer activities and work, you can't do this 24/7. What do you do for fun?**

I'm a spin instructor. It's so much fun to teach the spin, the cycling, and to work out. I'm fortunate that it's a hobby that I enjoy. And I love working with the Sudanese. It's just very fun to be in that community of young women who are looking to grow. A couple of weeks ago I went to a Sudanese dance party. There's a lot of family, a lot of music, beautiful wardrobes that the women had made themselves. It's a beautiful culture.

**TITLE:** President, Liberty Mutual Foundation; Vice President, Liberty Mutual Insurance

**AGE:** 54

**RESIDENCE:** Waltham

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree in finance; concentration in Spanish, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1984; MBA, Boston College, 1997; MPA, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2000