

PERSONALITIES OF PITTSBURGH

HEATHER ARNET

Leading fight for women's rights



JOE WOJCIK

Heather Arnet joined the Women and Girls Foundation in 2004 as its first CEO. Since then, she has been actively advocating for women's rights. But her feminist roots go back far further: her great-grandmother Mary was a suffragette. Below, she talks about her biggest accomplishments at the WGF, what she learned when she ran for state Senate and why she's a big Wonder Woman fan.

If you had to describe yourself in three words, what words would you use?
 Creative, fearless, loyal

What's one piece of legislation that you helped pass that's been most influential?

We got legislation passed through the Pittsburgh City Council and also on the county level that changed how appointments were made to public boards and commissions. Prior to that, there was no transparent process at all. Our intention was to diversify those boards. ... Now we are at 50-50, and you see people like the mayor and county executive talking more about the diversity of their senior staff and the appointments they make.

What's the next big issue you're tackling?

The U.S. is one of only a few developed nations without paid family leave. While there is legislation pending in Congress,

BIO BOX

Age: 41
Title: CEO, Women and Girls Foundation
Education: B.A., literary and cultural studies, Carnegie Mellon University
Experience: For the past 12 years, Arnet has served as CEO of the Women and Girls Foundation. Prior to joining the foundation, she worked in marketing and business development in the private sector in New York and for Pittsburgh's City Theatre on the South Side.

there's great opportunity to be able to get legislation passed at the local and state level. We will be working with partners in Philadelphia to lead up a state effort related to this. ... We are looking at a model developing family leave insurance funds. ... Employees and employers [would be] paying into the system and because it is everyone, the amount people [would pay] is very minimal. ... The top-level concern is every worker in Pennsylvania should be able to have nine to 12 weeks [of paid family leave]. ... It wouldn't just be parent leave. It's gender neutral. A person who is a parent can use that time to take care of a new child or a sick child or use it for bereavement, but also people can use it to take care of an elder parent or to take care of themselves during a chronic illness or if your spouse has a chronic illness.

I also saw that you direct films. Tell me about what you've produced and why?

"Madame Presidentia" was produced by the Women and Girls Foundation. I wrote and directed it and took a sabbatical to work on it. The film premiered on WQED and then at the Carnegie Museums. ... The main purpose of the film was to raise awareness of the fact that whenever the U.S. elects its first woman president, it's not a groundbreaking. So many other countries have elected female presidents, prime ministers before the U.S. Our film was posing the question why and how have other countries been able to do this

before us, and what do we have to learn in regards to women and women's rights in democracies?

What did you find?

Our most interesting finding is that there's a correlation between countries that have revised their constitutions in the last 100 years or are completely new democracies and those that have elected female presidents. In that process, women and minority groups are involved in the drafting of that constitution. You find things in those constitutions like human rights, paid family leave, equal pay, nondiscrimination laws built in because those groups had equal voice at the table in drafting those constitutions. ... When you think of who belongs at the helm of the U.S., there's the idea of the Founding Fathers. You don't see women in that room. Something in America has to change.

You ran for state Senate and lost. What did you learn from that experience?

It reinforced my strong belief that there needs to be more women in state government.

Do you plan to run for office again?

Maybe someday. Right now, unfortunately, I think our state and federal legislatures are so stuck in partisan bickering that we aren't seeing very much progress being made, so one of the things that is an advantage of being an advocate is in my role here at the foundation. I'm fairly confident I have more of an everyday ability to help push and pass good policy for working Pennsylvanians than maybe I would have had as a freshman legislator in a Legislature that won't come together to pass a budget.

Tell me about Wonder Woman.

I have this book that's a collection of Wonder Woman comics of the Golden Age comics. It was published in the '70s by Ms. Magazine. When I was a kid, I was given the book. It was one of the things I cherished. That book has traveled with me from home to college to New York apartments to Pittsburgh. Part of what I love about that character ... is she was very much about the pursuit of peace and justice. ... There are stories in the original Golden Age comics where the villain is someone who commits domestic violence and she helps get that person in prison. There's scenes at the end where women are celebrating her and Wonder Women saying "I didn't save you, I showed you how to save yourself." (I liked) this idea of a superhero who is fighting for equality and justice and who is trying to empower other people.

— Jennifer Curry

