

# Wellspring of Leadership

One woman spreads the art of collaborative leadership through consulting and non-profit work

By James Tenser

*Inside Tucson Business*

If you have never met an expert in cultural mythology, you are in for a treat. Elise Collins-Shields is a deep thinker, a passionate advocate of women's empowerment and a highly successful businesswoman with a clear agenda-

This former real estate broker is at once a liberal idealist and a member of the economic elite. The Shields Co., a real estate brokerage she and her husband Creston Shields built together in Colorado Springs, was sold "profitably" in 1996 after more than a decade of stunning success. Since relocating to Tucson, Collins-Shields has put her considerable energies into a for-profit consulting business and a not-for-profit foundation that share a name: Common Well Associates; Ltd, and CommonWell Institute International.

"In every culture across history, women were tasked with bringing water from the well to the community. This is still true in developing countries,"\* she said, by way of explaining the unifying metaphor.

Her work with and for women centers on her belief that their innate ways of working offer a valuable, balancing alternative to command and control leadership styles most often practiced by Western males. "Another thing happened when women went to the well," she said- "They were nourished culturally and emotionally through their interaction with the community. In modernized society, this aspect has largely been lost."

Cultural mythology, Collins-Shields' chosen field of study, is about collecting and analyzing the stories and belief systems that underlie culture. She puts her insight to very pragmatic use on behalf of women here in America and abroad. "I call my style sustainable leadership. Not gaining power over something or someone, but knowing myself and realizing my gifts and collaborating to put them into the world," she said. "Women's natural ways of leading are different from men's. They encompass relationship-building, community and collaboration vs. jockeying for power. These are skills that can be taught to anyone."

CommonWell Associates Ltd., her consulting firm, conducts leadership education, training and renewal retreats and workshops. It also provides global mentoring for women in different cultures. Among its activities are its signature "Return to the Well" retreats for executive women, conducted in the United States and abroad. Collins-Shields co-founded the firm with Sultana Parvanta, Ph.D., an Afghan-born expert in organizational transformation and human development,

Among the firm's many fans in Tucson is Greg Hollman, branch manager at the Foothills office of Coldwell Banker Success Southwest, where Collins-Shields conducted a series of workshops with Coldwell's agents about business time and life management.

The theme was about "being balanced in life in order to facilitate success" in the workplace, said Hollman, who reports a marked improvement in productivity following the workshops. But it was her interpersonal skills that impressed him most.

"Nobody can make you feel more at ease than she can. That's a skill that I don't think can be taught. She's a master at making people feel comfortable."

Collins-Shields' not-for-profit entity, CommonWell Institute International ([www.Commonwell.org](http://www.Commonwell.org)), promotes leadership and research on women, children and culture. Its mission is to pursue "scholarly research on leadership strategies that support the economic, educational and economic well-being of women and children." Current projects include annual leadership institutes for female students at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates, as well as a mentoring program in which students are paired with high achieving professional women from the U.S. and Canada, in collaboration with the Athena Foundation-Other outreach projects target the restoration of traditional food gardening methods and literacy in war-ravaged Afghanistan ("Seeding Change") . . .

Sheila Bapat, who recently joined Common Well Institute International as program director, said she counts Collins-Shields among the preeminent leaders in Tucson. "She is a woman whom I admire very much. Her commitment to the causes that she works with is just amazing and her passion is so compelling that I'm very eager to work with her."

Listening to Collins-Shields in her study at the upscale home she shares with her husband in the Catalina Foothills, one is struck by the contrast between the work of the CommonWell Institute in developing countries and the luxurious possessions that surround us. Without a trace of irony, she acknowledges that she stands with her feet in two worlds. "This work is imperative for us as a global community," she says. "We've got to stop looking at our helping others in the world as a kind of benevolent reaching down. It's not about that. It's about our Collective survival. I'm doing this for our grandchildren."

Her convictions run deep. "There is a great need to educate Americans about the world. For example, there is no need to rescue these women who are veiled. We need to respect them. While it may be all right to oppose certain regimes, I seriously question our right to go in and try to re-engineer their culture."

She continues, "We're sitting on a developing country right here in Arizona — in much of the Native American community. It's really been a low mark for our nation."

For 2004, she is planning to participate in a joint Chinese, and U.S. Women and Leadership summit planned in Beijing and Shanghai with a group called the All China Women's Federation. Scholarly papers are now being solicited for the conference with the goal of stimulating facilitated discussions on topics of interest to women worldwide.

Collins-Shields views co-mentoring dialog as a form of a diplomatic act that can achieve human progress outside of traditional government or military channels. Currently, she is writing a book on tribal leadership, drawing on her experience in applying Iroquois and Vietnamese Buddhist (Zen) philosophy in managing her real estate company in Colorado. The technique employs the use of personal, self-reflective journals. "We

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