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Women of Impact

ELIZABETH BALLARD
COMMUNITY CENTER

Becky Price



by Emily Mulligan,
photo by Steven Hertzog

With a combination of discipline, empathy and tenacity, Ballard Center CEO Becky Price turned a “nightmare” into a thriving nonprofit providing stability to families in need.

Unlike traditional corporate America, “success” in a nonprofit doesn’t have a specific visual, like sleek, trendy office décor or whiz-bang tech gizmos that blow people’s minds. In fact, there isn’t really a look at all for a successful nonprofit; it is all about action behind the scenes to meet the needs or the purpose of the people being served.

So how can we know if a person who works in nonprofits is good at what he does? It’s not really data that can tell part of the story. And it’s not completely about the budget or fund-raising, even though those are pretty crucial for a nonprofit to function.

Accomplishments, relationships and good feelings tell the best stories and demonstrate the most about outcomes of people who work in nonprofits. Becky Price has left a trail of all three of those in just about every single room she has entered for her past almost 40 years of work in Kansas nonprofits. Lucky for Lawrence, she lives here, and these days, she is the driving force behind the Ballard Center.

A moment to introduce—or maybe reintroduce—the Ballard Center. It is difficult to file it under a particular category of nonprofit because of its range of services. Ballard houses a day care and a preschool, and runs educational programming aimed at, but not exclusively for, low-income children and their families. The organization also provides rent and utility assistance for Douglas County residents in crisis, as well as a food pantry, a clothing closet and a “family stabilization network,” with access to other critical services such as legal help or even car repairs.

Price has been the CEO of Ballard since 2017. Neither her job nor her workplace are the kinds of things that allow for sitting still. Price moves all around the historic building pretty much constantly. She could be gathered in a meeting with staff and volunteers one minute, and then crouched down next to a small child the next. Price has stylish blonde hair that hangs past her shoulders, and her wardrobe reflects the attributes of the Ballard Center: colorful yet businesslike.

Saved From the Depths

To say that the mid-2010s were a tough time for Ballard might be an understatement.

“I like a challenge and am good in crisis situations. What I inherited was such a nightmare,” Price says.

And she might be being kind to call it a “nightmare.” Ballard Center was on the brink of failure altogether. The center owed about \$90,000 to local Lawrence businesses and vendors, Price explains. The building was in disrepair such that it was drawing scrutiny by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. Ballard’s relationships with other community entities and volunteers were strained, at best. There were no bylaws for the nonprofit, no database of donors, no personnel information, zero electronic records of anything.

Price says she could not apply for any grants in the first two years of her tenure, because with no records left behind, she didn’t have enough information to answer all the questions on grant applications.

Prior to her arrival, Ballard had absorbed Penn House, a clothing closet that had operated in Lawrence for 65 years. That meant Price was overseeing two separate buildings and essentially two nonprofits at the beginning. She knew Penn House was not sustainable in the long run, but she says it took her about a year to figure out

how to close and sell it. Now much of Penn House’s services are part of Ballard’s offerings, but finding the financial footing to operate that without taking away from Ballard’s already precarious position took some doing. Nowadays, Ballard doesn’t just exist, it is also thriving.

“Sometimes I’m amazed I did it. I wasn’t sure I could keep the thing afloat,” Price says.

Kind-Hearted Elbow Grease

Price has lived in Lawrence since 1980 and spent much of her career heading up Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Serving Douglas County, and then subsequently personally starting 16 Big Brothers Big Sisters offices across the state of Kansas. She also has worked statewide for the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence.

Her colleagues and partners in the nonprofit realm are not at all surprised at what Price has done turning around Ballard.

“She amazingly combines two things: She has real, heartfelt empathy, and at the same time, her mind is a very disciplined, business-related mind. She does both in a way that I’ve never seen in one person,” says local attorney and nonprofit advocate Wint Winter Jr.

Yet it isn’t just her organizational skills or the fact that she is “the most amazing delegator,” as her co-worker, Meg Pearson, at the Ballard Center, calls her. Colleagues describe her as driven and energetic, but her main attribute is her sincere and caring heart for others. Add in just the right amount of stubbornness, and that is Price.

“She’s a fireball,” says Pearson, who is a longtime co-worker of Price’s at BBBS who Price recently hired as director of communications and outreach at Ballard. “If she sees an in-

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justice, she is on the horn, immediately reaching out to those who can make a difference.”

When talking about Price, Winter references the adage about roadblocks making for the best gravel.

“She’s one of those people that when she gets something in her mind, she is going to do it,” he says.

It is that tenacity combined with a gentle touch of humanity that is what really helps her succeed, Pearson explains.

“She does a good job of connecting with everybody she meets. She’s not afraid of having a conversation about anything. She is very comfortable, very social but also very direct. It’s easy to have hard conversations with her because she’s so authentic,” Pearson says.

As for Price, besides hours upon hours and very long weeks, months and years of hard work, she credits her own self-awareness for much of her success as a leader.

“I think my greatest strength is talking people into doing stuff for me. But also, I’m very aware of what my strengths are not, and so I think that’s why I ask,” she says.

Weathering Her Own Storms

Having worked with families and particularly with children for so long, Price has seen some tragic things. She has lived them in her own life, as well. Her son, Skyler, whom she describes as the “kindest human being,” died 15 years ago at the age of 19. And Katherine, who was Price’s “little sister” through BBBS, became Price’s daughter starting at the age of 11, when her own family was forced to split up in tragic circumstances.

Katherine, now Kat Geddings, (Price calls her “Kit Kat”) works at Ballard, and her three children attend the pre-K and day care. Price’s husband, Jeff, has retired, and their daughter, Brittany, just gave birth to her second child this fall.

Price says she copes with stress by cooking. At times, she will cook up as many as three different meals in one evening, depending on how tough of a day she had. She says she likes the focus and purpose that cooking provides.

What does Price believe is the best approach to leading and managing others?

“Speak up. If you don’t understand, ask—probably other people don’t understand either, and they’ll learn if you ask,” she says. ▲



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