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Vliet leaves post, not passion

BY FRED MANN
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Working to improve the health of children for years, Marni Vliet learned the importance of good leadership.

Now she wants to step out on her own and spread some of the lessons she learned to others.

So, Vliet said Wednesday, she has decided to resign as president and chief executive of the Kansas Health Foundation.

Vliet, who has been with the foundation more than 20 years and served as its president since 1996, plans to start a consulting firm to help other organizations locally and nationally with strategic planning and organizational and leadership development. Her resignation is effective immediately.

A leave of absence this summer gave her the time and distance to reflect on the change and make her decision, Vliet said.

"I've always thought, 'When I get old, I'll do that,' " she said. "I'm not admitting that 59 ½ is old, but it seemed like the time now."

Vliet said she needed a more flexible schedule than that granted to a full-time chief executive to pursue the plan.

The flexibility also will allow her to spend more time with her husband, downtown developer and Larkspur co-founder Rich Vliet, who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), often referred to as Lou Gehrig's Disease.

"Being a full-time CEO, as wonderful as it is and as great as the staff and board were, having a daily life with a little more flexibility in the schedule will be perfect. I like any time I can get with Rich," she said. "Given the disease and how wretched it is, he's doing remarkably well, but it is progressing."

Vliet will continue as a consultant with the foundation while its board conducts a national search for a successor. Don Stewart will serve as interim leader. Stewart, a former chief operating officer at Wesley Medical Center, is senior vice president at the foundation.

A focus on children

The Kansas Health Foundation is a private philanthropic organization with a mission to improve the health of all Kansans. It started in 1985 with \$200 million from the sale of Wesley Medical Center to Hospital Corporation of America, and has grown its assets to \$490 million.

The foundation allocates about \$23 million annually in areas of children's health, leadership, public health and health policy.

Vliet is leaving a position that has paid well; her total compensation package was \$369,594 in 2005, according to the most recent federal tax information available on the organization.

Vliet, a Wichita native, has been with the foundation almost from the beginning, first as a consultant evaluating grant proposals, then as a program officer, vice president for programs and executive vice president and chief operating officer.

She was elected president by the board in July 1996 to succeed Jack Davis, who retired. Her long-term goal was to make Kansas widely recognized as the best state in the country to raise children.

Vliet helped the foundation's focus evolve toward children's health beginning in 1987, thanks to advice from one of her mentors, former board member Bob Ebert, who told her that her passion for disease prevention should begin with children.

"It was a light bulb to me," she said.

Vliet said she's seen progress toward the goal in the form of increased media focus and community discussion of early childhood issues.

"I think to that degree we are well on our way," Vliet said. "You can't just legislate one big year of early childhood development; you have to really change the culture. I think there is clear evidence of that happening."

A vision for Kansas

Vliet helped launch the Kansas Health Institute, an organization that provides objective information on health issues to policy makers.

She also oversaw the formation of the Kansas Leadership Center, a nonprofit statewide entity that opened in January with the mission to develop leaders who will mobilize and transform their communities, institutions and organizations.

"The vision she has helped shape is like the North Star, and it will continue guiding the foundation," said Sonia Greteman, owner of Greteman Group branding agency, who has been working with the foundation for about 20 years.

Ron Holt, the foundation's board chairman and assistant Sedgwick County manager, said Vliet's legacy will be her theme of making Kansas the best place to raise children as well as the creation of the health institute and leadership center.

"Her legacy for the foundation will be long-lasting," Holt said.

David Adkins, a former state legislator who is vice chancellor for external affairs for the University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City, received a leaders' fellowship from the foundation two years ago. He said Vliet is a catalyst for bringing people together and giving them a sense of empowerment.

"I think people will look back 20 and 30 years from now and say under her leadership the health foundation defined what it would do and how it would do it, and as a result of that, Kansas ended being a better place," he said.

Raising awareness

Karen Humphreys, a friend and board member for both the health institute and the leadership center, said Vliet's devotion to the state is an essential part of her.

"The value she places on family -- Kansas is kind of a family in a large sense. So it's not a coincidence Marni's emphasis on values includes her own family."

Vliet also initiated the Emmy Award-winning "Let's Take It Outside" marketing campaign designed to protect children from secondhand smoke.

"I think Marni has touched the lives of thousands of people in this state, most especially children," said Joe Norris of Sullivan Higdon Sink advertising agency, who worked with her on the campaign.

"Very few people can look back at what they've accomplished in their careers and see they've accomplished as much good for the state and other people as Marni has."

Vliet serves on several national boards, including Drug Strategies and the Centers for Disease Control Foundation, and she is former chair of the Grantmakers in Health and Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, formerly the President's Drug Advisory Council.

But she is proudest of helping to raise awareness about how people can improve their health and the health of the community, she said.

Along the way, she learned what philanthropy was all about, she said.

"Philanthropy is a huge responsibility and a huge privilege. I feel like I have had both of those things in spades," Vliet said.

"To be able to work with people independently with no vested interest except the good of the people, what a privilege that is."

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