An investment in our alumnae

Now that Linnea Conrad Roberts has made her mark in business, she’s helping other women to do the same.

It was just a few years after receiving her MBA from Chicago Booth that Linnea Conrad Roberts made her first gift to the school.

“I divide the world into two buckets: the people who can and do and the people who can and don’t bother,” she said. “I’ve always thought that when you’ve been blessed with a good career and have been fortunate in your life, it’s important to give back.”

Roberts’ philanthropic inclination, coupled with a position at Goldman Sachs that focused on the recruitment and retention of women, helped foster her interest in supporting women at various stages of their professional and personal lives.

Gender Challenges
Roberts recalled the start of her own career when, as a young woman, she had difficulty securing an internship within the financial industry. She remembers one particular occasion when two male interviewers remarked that because she had never played sports in school, they were unsure that she would be able to function in a team environment.

“I explained that I had sailed competitively and believed that took more team coordination than throwing someone a ball, but they didn’t like that answer,” she said. “Eventually, I got an internship working with two women at Chemical Bank who were able to look past my lack of competitive baseball experience.”

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Coached by female mentors and supervisors, Roberts ultimately landed jobs and promotions that had previously eluded her. As she became more successful, she passed her knowledge along to other women and developed a passion for gender diversity. Now it is only natural that Roberts would focus her philanthropic efforts on helping Chicago Booth alumnae restart their careers after taking time off to raise a family.

“Women are incredibly effective in the workforce,” she said. “It’s ironic that corporations complain about not finding talented women when there are so many who want to come back to work. We just need to create a bridge.”

Roberts hopes that this bridge building will begin with Relaunch, a pilot program she is funding targeting alumnae who are restarting their careers after a three- to 10-year hiatus. This three-day program, to be held October 24-26 in Chicago, will provide individual career coaching and networking opportunities while building awareness of career reentry resources and programs along with developing an actionable career management plan.

“Women who have been away from the workforce are insecure about their skill set and abilities,” she said. “Confidence is a huge part of getting, keeping, progressing, and excelling at a job. Women need the right tools to have a rich and satisfying career. Imagine if we got to a point where, for every woman we lost to spend time with her family, we got one back. That’s what I’d like to see Relaunch accomplish.”
An investment in our alumnae
continued

The Importance of Education
After graduating with an accounting and computer science degree from Valparaiso University, Roberts started her career at Price Waterhouse and then moved on to work for a client, An OroAmerica. She enjoyed public accounting but wanted to expand on the number and type of jobs that were open to her, so she decided to pursue an MBA at Chicago Booth.

“For my undergraduate degree, I went to a small school in the Midwest that not many people were familiar with,” she said. “I thought having an MBA from a school that many of the companies I wanted to work for had heard of would be important. At Booth, I was with a more challenging mix of peers—I was swimming with fish much smarter than I was and that was a valuable experience. I don’t think I would have had a job in investment banking if I had not gone to a top business school. The credibility of the school is very important.”

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Roberts began working at Lehman Brothers in 1990, eventually serving as co-head of Lehman Brothers’ Global Technology Group until 2004. She then joined Goldman Sachs as a partner and served as co-head of technology within the Global Technology, Media and Telecom Group.

A Focus on Women’s Issues
In 2011, Roberts transitioned to a role as an advisory director where she concentrated on recruiting and mentoring in Goldman’s Investment Banking Division in the Americas, with a particular emphasis on female professionals.

“The challenge to employers is that women don’t come in and ask for what they need,” she said. “It’s kind of like breaking up with a boyfriend. There’s not a lot of conversation. They just walk in and say ‘it’s over.’ Women, in particular, need to understand that there is plenty of gray space to explore between ‘I’m in this career forever’ and ‘I quit.’ Binary thinking doesn’t get to a solution. We need to coach women on how to reach their hands into the machinery to get what they need.”

“I don’t see philanthropy as doing something nice,” she said. “I think that when you are doing well, it is expected.”

Roberts, who has been a member of the Council on Chicago Booth since 2005, has long supported the school. Her first gift in 1993 of $100 went toward the Annual Fund. Throughout the years, the size of her gifts grew, and, over time, she changed her focus from investing in scholarships to her most recent pledge of $2 million toward initiatives supporting Booth alumnae in their lives and careers.

“I found that many scholarship dollars were available to the ‘most accomplished,’ yet some women still needed the opportunity to accomplish something,” she said. “During the past several years of working with women at Goldman Sachs, I developed a greater compassion for those who made the choice to focus on family for a period of time, I believe it is economically short-sighted to not actively look to keep these women in the workforce or to create a more robust pathway back into a meaningful career. The decision to raise a family should not be a one-way street. It should be just one of many routes we take along our careers and lifetimes.”

Since retiring from Goldman Sachs in March of 2016, Roberts is looking into several business and investment ideas with the underlying theme of sponsoring and helping women excel.

She also is spending more time fully exploring her philanthropic interests which, in addition to Chicago Booth, focus on education equality for children and children’s mental health. Roberts currently serves as chair of the board for Teach for America, New York, and she is also a board member of the Child Mind Institute and New Leaders.

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