

Leading lady

Melinda French Gates is no ordinary woman. Once a formidable force in the world of business, she has moved on to become a leader in philanthropic enterprise, with a goal to diminish inequity in the world. With her husband, Microsoft tycoon Bill Gates, she has created the largest transparent charitable organisation in the world – the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Working to help others on this scale requires the sort of resources and dedication more commonly associated with governments than individuals. But the Gates are in a unique position: he has the resources, but she has the strength of conviction required to see the big picture, a quality she has demonstrated throughout her life.

As a youngster living in Dallas, Texas, she became valedictorian of her class at Ursuline Academy, a Catholic girls' school. She went on to gain a degree in computer science and economics from Duke University in 1986 and an MBA from Duke's Fuqua School of Business in 1987. That same year she moved to Seattle to take up a job at the Microsoft Corporation, the rising star of the IT world. She distinguished herself in leading the development of numerous Microsoft products, travelling around the US visiting the firm's offices and showing an extraordinary ability to get people to work together effectively – a trait that is standing her in good stead today in the world of philanthropy.

Melinda first met Bill at a Microsoft press event in Manhattan soon after she started work at the corporation. They weren't the only Microsoft couple, but not everyone was lucky enough to receive the elaborate marriage proposal Bill had organised for Melinda. In 1993, he secretly diverted a chartered plane to land in Omaha, where they were met by friend and fellow philanthropist Warren Buffett, who arranged for a jewellery store to open so that they could pick an engagement ring.

She may be best known for being married to the richest man in the world, but **Melinda Gates** is an amazing success story in her own right – both in business and, more recently, as joint head of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Debbie Harris profiles the woman who, at just 42, is changing the face of philanthropy.



(left to right) Bill Gates, his wife Melinda Gates and friend Warren Buffett are devoted to their charitable organisations.

Even when they were dating they would take long walks and ruminate over the best ways to dispose of large sums of money, and this proved to be the precursor to their first venture, the William H Gates Foundation, named after Bill's father, which was set up in 1994 to focus on global health. Bill has always been the centre of media coverage, but it is clear that Melinda, who is slowly emerging into the spotlight, is an influential force. 'You know, I wouldn't be doing the foundation if it wasn't for her, and she's really shaped where we're going with it,' Bill has said of his philanthropic efforts. And Melinda has a clear agenda on a range of issues.

Founding the Foundation

Now 42, Melinda worked at Microsoft until 1996, a year that marked the birth of her first child, Jennifer. It was a special time in her life, and she decided to give up work, but promised herself that when her daughter turned one she would re-embark on her philanthropic work. In 1997 the couple created the Gates Library Foundation, which, among other donations, funded the placing of computers with internet connection into public libraries in the US.

In 2000 the William H Gates Foundation and the Gates Library Foundation merged to form the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Foundation focuses on three main areas: global health, global development and the US. Most of the money is spent HIV/AIDS, while the rest goes towards tackling homelessness and a crumbling education system in the US. Melinda is driven by a strong desire to diminish inequity around the world – clearly an agenda close to her heart. 'We have a chance to make sure that no matter where a person is born, he or she has the chance to live a healthy, productive life,' she has said.

Her role puts her at the forefront of strategic developments and, when necessary, strategic re-assessments. She also travels extensively around the world, working with beneficiaries and measuring implementation, working with governments and giving speeches to highlight the importance of the Foundation's work. It's a diplomatic role that suits her, and echoes the work she did in her early years at Microsoft.

Balancing act

How she does all of this as a mother to three children is a careful balancing act. But spending time with her children isn't necessarily removed from the work she does; philanthropy is something the whole family is involved in. This sense of responsibility echoes Bill's mother, Mary Gates, who wrote a letter on her death bed urging the family to use their wealth for good: 'For those to whom much is given, much is expected'.

Melinda is passing on invaluable skills to her children, and they in turn have given her unexpected insights into the work being done. After taking them to help pack toiletries and supplies to give to the homeless, she got more than she bargained for when she asked her four year old for thoughts on what they just did: 'But Mom! Don't they need a home?' was the reply.

Realising that the issue of homelessness isn't solved by filling boxes, or even just giving people jobs, the Gates Foundation established the \$40 million Sound Families Initiative in 2000, a programme of 1,500 transitional housing units for homeless families, or families likely to become homeless in Pierce, Snohomish Counties and King counties, Washington state, with on-site provisions that help them get back on their feet.

Women's rights

The issue of women's rights is also central to the Foundation's work. The fact that the world has not been allowed to forget about the AIDS epidemic is partly due to Melinda's tireless work towards the empowerment of vulnerable women affected by the virus. But the fight for women's rights is something that her husband is also heavily involved in. Together they have publicly criticised the US and various African governments who back abstinence as a means to fight HIV. Melinda recently attacked African leaders with strong reservations over the use of condoms, as well as US Christian fundamentalists who also back these policies.

Melinda has also shown great compassion towards subjugated women,

as was evident on a recent visit to Calcutta, where she was photographed holding hands with women in the red light district. With this in mind, the Foundation is funding important research into microbicides – gels or barrier creams that will kill HIV and that women can use before sex. It is hoped that interventions such as this will start giving power back to women, who are often not able to insist on the use of condoms, in the fight against AIDS.

Public and private life

Despite her numerous public appearances, Melinda has been known to ask friends and family not to give out any details of her private life. In fact, it is also a rarity to see the couple socialising in public. She shies away from the spotlight, but understands that at times the media spotlight can be used to publicise her causes. A higher profile will help attract other beneficiaries and influence government policy around the world.

Melinda Gates is increasingly becoming the figurehead for the Gates Foundation. She is not one to blow her own trumpet, but the work requires a strong public presence, and her public speaking allows people to see her charisma and humility for themselves. Considering the intractable issues she has chosen, the level of achievement is remarkable. So far the Foundation has invested \$11 billion, benefiting 100 countries, with an endowment of \$30 billion as of October 2006. But, regardless of Melinda's enormous influence – *Forbes* ranks her the 12th most powerful woman in the world and she was top of the *Wall Street Journal's* list of '50 women to watch' – it is her quiet empathy and down-to-earth nature that continues to charm people worldwide. ■

Spirit of giving

Melinda Gates may have more money at her disposal than most, but she is not the first or the only woman to make a name for herself in the world of philanthropy:

Angelina Jolie



There aren't many that can say they give away one-third of their earnings to charitable causes, but A-list actress Angelina Jolie, quoted as being surprised at her 'stupid income', is one of those people. She has travelled extensively as the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), raising awareness and money for programmes that assist about 20 million refugees in 120 countries.

Emma Thompson



London-born actor Emma Thompson is renowned for roles in films such as *Howard's End*, *Sense & Sensibility* and *Love Actually*. But far fewer know about her philanthropic work. She has been the ambassador for ActionAid since 2000, and is another prominent advocate for HIV/AIDS. Thompson also champions the issue of homelessness through *Alone in London*.

Doris Buffett



The older sister of billionaire philanthropist and investor Warren Buffett, Doris Buffett is also the founder and president of the Sunshine Lady Foundation, which is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year. Entirely funded by her, the family-run organisation focuses on ending domestic violence and has awarded more than \$30 million in grants since 1996.

Harriet Bullitt



Along with her late sister, Patsy Bullitt Collins, Harriet Bullitt has used most of her \$375 million fortune to promote environmental causes. The Bullitt Foundation helps to 'protect, restore and maintain' the natural environment of Pacific North West America. Programmes underway include the reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions, and she has also built the Sleeping Lady Mountain Retreat on land she purchased to prevent it from being developed into apartments.