

Superlatives

PEOPLE, CULTURE, STYLE

POWER STRIP

a quick study

AS ELAINE WYNN STEPS INTO THE NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT, SHE'S PICKED SUSIE LEE TO TAKE THE REINS AT COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS.

BY LISA ARCELLA

Susie Lee's family has a running joke: If you aren't crawling onto the plane after visiting her house, then it just wasn't a successful trip. The 44-year-old mother of two young children is a Girl Scout leader, the president of Nevada Women's Philanthropy, has been committed to numerous nonprofits and is an avid bicyclist and sports enthusiast. "I do need to slow down a bit," she laughs. "But I have a lot of energy."

That's an understatement for sure, but she'll need every ounce of that enthusiasm to follow in the venerable footsteps of Elaine Wynn as the new chair of the board of Communities in Schools of Nevada. Wynn, who heads up CIS on a national level, handpicked Lee to take over the reins locally, certainly an honor coming from one of the most passionate spokespeople for education in the state. The two women have known each other for many years, ever since Lee's husband, Dan, began working as CFO at Wynn's Mirage resort. Then, in 1995, Wynn reached out to Lee to become the founding director of the Inner-City Games, now the After-School All-Stars.

continued on page 56

Susie Lee and Elaine Wynn at the Cosmopolitan penthouse



Susie Lee (FAR RIGHT) at McCall Elementary. CIS worked with Clubs Care About Kids to secure donations for Valley students.

continued from page 55

“I watched that girl roll up her sleeves and go out and work in 110-degree weather with children on a soccer field,” Wynn says. “You can’t phone this in. And she has high expectations, which I love because you have to demand from people working with children very high levels of integrity and stick-to-it-ness. This is not a sprint. It is a marathon.”

When Wynn, chairman of the CIS national board since 2007, began spending more and more time in Washington and the other 26 states that have CIS programs, she again reached out to Lee to take over the program locally. “I called her up and said, ‘This is divine intervention; I need you,’” Wynn laughs. “I told her, ‘I have no doubt in my mind that you are the one for this job.’ And all summer long she has been e-mailing me and giving me assignments!”

CIS helps more than a million children across the country (a number projected to soon double) by placing an in-house coordinator in schools, to help determine the needs of its at-risk students and help facilitate services for them. “The core of what Communities in Schools does is show kids that we care,” Lee says. “We care if they’re hungry or their teeth hurt. We can bring someone in who can say, ‘Let’s get you a pair of glasses,’ or ‘Let’s get you homework help.’ You can’t learn when your basic needs haven’t been met.” The program has been proven effective. In a five-year independent study, Communities in Schools has been shown to reduce high school dropout rates significantly.

Lee, who was one of eight kids growing up in Ohio, understands how taking someone under your wing can change their life. “I was sort of struggling—my family didn’t have the money to afford the college I was going to,” she says. “There was a guy in my class, Bob Casey, who noticed that I was working really hard and became a mentor to me. When I asked him why, he said, ‘One day you will be successful and you’re going to turn around and help someone else.’ It’s cliché, but that’s what Communities in Schools does.”

Lee says that Wynn has been a constant source of inspiration to her as well. At 69, the grandmother of seven certainly shows no sign of slowing down. In addition to being on the board of the company she founded with her ex-husband, Steve, Wynn was also recently appointed to the boards of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Library of Congress Trust Fund and has dedicated herself to numerous causes—particularly for children in need.

“I strive to have balance in my life,” Wynn says. “I always hoped I could maintain a balance in trying to be a good wife, mother, grandmother and community person. Ultimately we have chapters in our lives.



Susie Lee and Elaine Wynn

INSIGHT

Opportunity for Giving: CIS’ Scarecrow Festival on October 21 at the Sport Center of Las Vegas. Wynn herself has pledged to match up to \$550,000 to the cause.

communitiesinschools.org

It’s always been my intention that I want my legacy to be about civic leadership and having helped create and participated in institutions that are important to the welfare and well-being of other people. I can’t enjoy my life when I see people who are not enjoying theirs.”

As for handing over the reins of Communities in Schools, she says the only thing that really matters is the kids they are helping. “I feel proprietary about everything that I do, and I think that is just a function of leadership,” Wynn says. “You always want to feel proud of something you create. Another key ingredient to being an effective leader is knowing when it’s time for you to move on, because the organization is more important than you are. You have to think about your legacy. It would kill me to go off and start gallivanting around the country, letting CIS Nevada fall apart. I am joyful that I can pass this on to somebody who is going to take it to the next level.” **V**

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER DE VARGAS (WYNN AND LEE)