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Monroe's retirement caps prominent career

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Ann Monroe isn't quite sure what she'll do next after she retires next month from the Health Foundation of Central and Western New York.

But she knows one thing for sure: She wants to stay relevant.

That's why when the foundation invited friends and colleagues to celebrate the end of her 14-year tenure as president/CEO, Monroe dubbed it a retirement party.

"I wasn't fired," she was quick to point out. "I'm just getting fired up about what's next."

That next opportunity could include a short-term consulting assignment, an interim CEO post or maybe just some volunteering. And though Monroe is well-known both here and across the state for her work in Medicaid reform, health care and aging issues, her background includes work in mental health, poverty and low-income housing.

Besides building up programs and structure at the \$112 million foundation, she spent many hours working on Medicaid reform at the state level. She was co-chair of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Medicaid redesign team and co-chair of the state's oversight panel for the Medicaid delivery system reform program.

Both are significant achievements for someone who describes herself as just a girl from West Bend, Wis., who took 10 years to finish college. Her early 20s job history includes stints as a waitress, manager of a Scandinavian furniture shop, a law firm secretary and the first woman analyst at Dun & Broadstreet.

She landed in government work almost by accident when a neighbor in Chicago asked her to move to Springfield for a job in state government. The job didn't pan out and instead she found herself at age 28 working for the Illinois Department of Mental Health during deinstitutionalization. She was liaison between the union negotiating team and the hospital superintendents.



JIM COURTNEY

Ann Monroe will retire from her foundation CEO job but is eager to identify her next leadership opportunity.

Other posts include assistant superintendent of a mental health hospital, then 10 years as senior vice president of Blue Cross of California. When that company decided to privatize into Wellpoint, she was responsible for developing two major independent foundations with more than \$1 billion in funds.

The job at the Health Foundation came next.

"When you're in such different jobs, you have to quickly learn about other people and then relate to them at a variety of levels," she said. "I learned how to listen, and I have really worked on that my whole career, to be able to really listen to what's being said."

She also points to quick thinking ("You can't do a lot of pondering in a lot of those jobs."), as well as the power of the human connection. Both are qualities that have stayed with her throughout her career.

Monroe is proud of her part in what's been accomplished here. She said the local health sector has improved significantly over 14 years from one that had very little collaboration across organizations, with very little camaraderie or communication. That goes not only for nonprofit and health care organizations but the funders, as well.

"The whole philanthropic community is at a much different place," she said. "Being here in this community when all that was happening was really great. It was an opportunity to create the kind of philanthropic environment that I felt was really important."

Monroe said a major accomplishment was establishing the health foundation as a partner with community organizations versus simply being a funder with a checkbook, with less of a power imbalance. And she's proud of pushing the envelope on issues and programs that focus on performance, whether it's helping reduce falls and injuries among seniors or maternal health.

Lots of work remains that will keep the next leader busy, however, especially in the post-election period, with potentially major changes to health care and social policies promised by the Trump administration.

"Funding in health and human services now is so tenuous, not so much in the dollars but more in direction," she said. "I think that puts philanthropy in a really opportunistic place to be able to help facilitate organizations making the jump from one place to another, but it also makes it harder to think about seeding a program that you might want to have funded where sustainability is sketchy."

"It raised the question of what is philanthropy? If dollars are shifting from one place to another, what is our role in all of that?"

Tracey Drury
Reporter
Buffalo Business First

