

# FOCUS ON CAREERS

*Whether you're  
in a career rut  
or just starting out,  
the surest way  
to success is to...*

## See a mentor be a mentor



**TWO OF A KIND:** Lori Roth (R) entered The Minerva Foundation's mentoring program certain she would quit her documentary filmmaking career. Then she met mentor Helena Cynamon (seated), a successful film and television producer, who helped her realize she loved film, but needed a new way to pursue it

By Victor Chew Wong

Last February Lori Roth was in a career rut. At 47, the documentary filmmaker and single mother was facing a mid-life crisis. Possessing a sharp and inquisitive mind, she loved her profession, but eight years of applying for grants and searching for project funding left her exhausted and seeking answers to the question: What now?

"I had been underemployed for the eight years that I was working as a film producer," says Roth, whose films like *Stolen Lives*, *Children in the Sex Trade* and *Truth and Betrayal* focus on humanitarian issues. "I wouldn't say that I was making much money. I knew I had to make some radical decisions about my direction."

Roth, a mother of two teenage boys, faced a professional dilemma that affected her personal life and left her in a near-depressed state.

"I love the work, but it was so scarce," she says. "I couldn't ignore it any more. It wasn't the lack of money. I felt like I wasn't doing anything, that I was, creatively, just wasting away."

A career salvation came in the form of an article she read in *The Vancouver Sun* profiling a mentoring program intended to help reintegrate into the workforce professional women who were either underemployed or had interrupted their careers for any number of reasons.

Vancouver's Minerva Foundation – a non-profit founded in 1999 that creates opportunities for BC women by focusing on projects that enhance women's education, leadership development, economic security and safety – completed a pilot project called Minerva Helping Women Work and are now concluding their first official program.

"I thought it was absolute serendipity," Roth says. "The article described the pilot session the women had just finished. I went to the website and found they were taking applications for the next session."

Roth, along with 75 other women, applied for entry into the mentoring program and was one of 15 accepted into its first full session in April 2005.

According to Danna Murray, director of special projects for the Minerva Foundation, the idea for the mentoring program arose due to the demand from many women in the community seeking help from the foundation to re-enter the work force. The foundation then conducted a series of focus groups to determine where there were gaps in their services.

"We saw there were women who had taken a hiatus from their careers because of child rearing, to look after parents, or because of immigration or a cross-country move," Murray says.

"One of our mandates is economic security and we had an overwhelming demand from the community of

women wanting to get back into the workforce."

The question for the foundation – which is funded primarily by corporate and individual donations – was what form the program would take.

"Many of our constituents have risen to a high level of management and are at the stage where they're able to give back, so mentoring made total sense," Murray says. "There are all different kinds of mentoring."

"Our constituents are career women with families who don't have a lot of time. We thought they would agree to be mentors if it were manageable, so the minimum mentor commitment we asked for was a 90-minute information interview with a protégé, or to sit on a panel and talk about their industry."

"We currently have about 160 mentors in our database, but we're always on the lookout for more," says Murray, with the foundation for five years now.

The five-month program is broken into three distinct parts: a self-discovery phase, a meet-the-mentor stage and a job search portion.

After breaking for the summer, Roth's group of protégés will begin the third section in September.

"We will be out looking for work in September," she says. "The group will support each other in looking only at opportunities that are what we want and need. We don't want to take jobs out of fear. We don't want to compromise our goals."

"It was made very clear that mentors were not potential employers and to be prepared for the information interviews because these women were very busy. But it was a very organic process in the sense that if you made a connection with a mentor and developed a relationship there was no limit to how often you could meet or talk."

To date, Roth has been more than pleased with the process.

Initially, Roth thought she was due for a career change, but the mentoring process has revealed to her that she really does love film – she just has to find a different way of making it work.

"I went to Minerva looking for guidance," she says. "I wanted to use the skill base I had as a filmmaker and apply it to something else. At the beginning of the process I envisioned that I would find a new career path or job. I was open to whatever that would look like. I had some thoughts about what it might be, but I was sure it wasn't going to be film – maybe advertising, maybe communications, maybe marketing."

"But what I really got from the self-exploration process was that film making is what I really wanted to do. I just needed to do it differently. I want to make money at it."

Pivotal in that realization was one of Roth's mentors, Kick Pictures executive producer Helena Cynamon, who has 20 years in the film industry and

see MENTORING page 10

# Mentoring fosters mutual personal growth

continued from page 4

has produced television series such as *Madison*, *The Adventures of Shirley Holmes* and *The Magician's House*.

For Cynamon, who also does informal mentoring in the film industry, this was her first experience with the Minerva Foundation and she found it rewarding.

"I was flattered to be asked to be a mentor, because when you're still in the process of searching new mazes in the film business, you never think of yourself as a mentor," says Cynamon, who is 51. "I have tremendous respect for their courage to plunge in and do the heavy work of reshifting; and especially among colleagues and peers.

"The mentoring validated my experience. I do enjoy sharing what I know; it's another way of connecting the dots. You never know how much you know until you are asked about it.

"How often do you take stock of what you've accomplished? In this business you have to constantly reinvent yourself and I enjoyed the process of discovery the mentoring has given me.

"Originally I said I would donate a couple of hours, but once I got to know Lori, I really liked her and at this point it's just open ended. I guess if the personality and fit are right, it can be a lifelong relationship."

Cynamon's impact on Roth was significant.

"Helena encouraged me to stay in film," Roth says. "It was her guidance that helped confirm that I should be in film; that I love what I do, but that I should do it differently. My success was going to happen if I stayed true to my passion. When I made that realization, the universe started opening doors for me."

Roth credits the Minerva program for giving her the confidence to teach a documentary filmmaking course at the Vancouver Film School this summer. The program has also allowed her to explore a number of other creative possibilities she would not have considered previously, including pairing with a colleague to offer creative content for web and other new media.

"What I'm grateful to Minerva for is that I'm in a better position to meet opportunities that present themselves," Roth says.

"I had lost my groove. I had doubted myself, I was coming from a place of scarcity and fear. Now I feel completely empowered. It's manifesting itself in abundance and opportunity. I'm ready to rock and roll."

While the Minerva mentoring program is targeted at mid-career women, Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT), a non-profit program administered by the Vancouver Board of Trade, connects members of the business community with students in their last year of post-secondary education to help propel them into their chosen profession.

LOT – which has paired 1,000 students with 475 mentors since its founding in 1999 – asks that mentors and protégés meet at least two hours monthly during the September to April academic year.

Terence Huang, 25, finished the LOT program in the spring and credits it with opening his eyes to how the business world operates.

"I realized that a lot of the skills you need to be successful don't come from school," says Huang, who completed a degree in computing science from SFU in April 2005. "They come from intuition and dealing with people and you have to get out and do it."

Huang, who is also a musician, landed a job at Electronic Arts in June and has ambitions to become a producer in the entertainment industry.

"I didn't use LOT to get my job, but I used it to gain a lot of the soft skills, and I know I will use them throughout my career," he says.

"I was quite surprised that my mentor, Rajesh, was so young. I was expecting someone in his 50s. What impressed me about Rajesh were his abilities to organize entrepreneurial endeavours at such an early age and his talent in helping peers network."

Rajesh Taneja – who despite his relative youth of 29 years is CEO of Clear

Choice Technologies and president of SSID Canada, a venture technology firm – sees mentoring as an opportunity to give back.

"I've been through a lot of ups and downs and I thought it would be a chance to help people avoid some of what I've been through," says Taneja, "I wanted to use my experience and gift it, with a desire to improve someone else's life."

Taneja credits his mentors for helping him start Clear Choice.



**YOUNG AND YOUNGER:** Though only 29, Rajesh Taneja (L) has given guidance to protégé Terence Huang, 25



**MIGRANT MENTOR:** Christiane Ahpin (seated) has been successful in helping guide Patricia Borges toward success

"My mentor, Mike Green, helped me start Clear Choice in 1995 by giving me a list of clients and pushing me in the right direction," Taneja says. "Instead of going to university, I started my company."

"Mentoring has changed me in a number of ways. I've probably learned as much from Terence as he did from me. It's good to be regarded with respect, but there's much more that Terence knows about some things than I do. A wise man is one who knows he has much to learn.

"Before starting the program I thought that my relationship with my protégé would be finite in the sense that the relationship would end when the program ended, but that's not the case. In fact, our relationship continues after the program ended."

Another protégé in the current Minerva mentoring session is 36-year-old Patricia Borges. Brazilian by birth, Borges came to Vancouver in 2001 to attain a post-graduate diploma in management at Capilano College.

A lawyer in Brazil, Borges worked extensively for six years in tax consult-

ing and international business advice dealing with contractual law, performing legal audits in mergers and acquisitions for PricewaterhouseCoopers.

In January 2003 Borges, now a landed immigrant, took time off from school and career to have her daughter Catarina.

When Catarina was one, Borges decided to re-enter the workforce, but despite her legal and international business background found it difficult to crack the Vancouver market.

"After Catarina was one-year old I started looking for work, but couldn't find any," Borges says. "I found it a little puzzling. I speak four languages and have a legal background, but I couldn't get an interview.

"I found out about the Minerva program and decided to apply to see if I could find out why there were barriers. The program is absolutely fantastic. Some of the mentors edited my resume, some took me to networking events so I could meet more people in the industries I'm interested in."

Though she cannot give legal advice in Canada, the program has allowed Borges to focus her search on industries and positions.

"When I came to Minerva, I thought that because I was a mom I would only be able to get small jobs," Borges says. "But all of these mentors are moms and they are successful. I never thought that I would rebuild my career completely, but my mentors and the program have shifted my attitude.

One of Borges' mentors is 53-year-old Christiane Ahpin, chief operating officer of the British Columbia Medical Association.

"I was really happy to have Patricia as my protégé," says Ahpin, herself an immigrant from the island of Mauritius. "I could identify with her being a new immigrant, trying to establish herself in a new country.

"Being a woman myself and having grown up in a mostly male-dominated field, it has been a lot harder for me than a man," Ahpin says. "I feel a lot of empathy for a woman who is trying to make it."

Ahpin makes the connection between being a mentor and having been mentored.

"I had two very good mentors in my career," she says. "One is a doctor who I've known now for more than 12 years who has always set me on the right path. The other was a math professor at the University of Windsor who pushed me to succeed in what was then an uncommon field for women to be in." ■