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Brainerd keeps up tradition of community involvement



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Mary Brainerd, pictured outside her home near White Bear Lake, works to balance her career and community involvement with family time.

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Newly named CEOs in Minnesota not only have to face the challenge of learning how to run their companies. They're expected to uphold the legacy created by business leaders of the past who have established a long-standing reputation for unyielding community service, as well.

When Mary Brainerd was named chief executive at Bloomington-based HealthPartners in 2002, counterparts at several Twin Cities businesses called and told her of the opportunities she would have in her new role.

That expectation didn't leave Brainerd overwhelmed, however. She's been volunteering for community endeavors since joining the school board at Mounds Park Academy two decades ago when her oldest child was 2. The school was looking for women who didn't have children enrolled at Mounds Park, but who could help direct the future of the organization.

"I fit that bill," she said, adding that at the time, she didn't know a lot about education. "What a wonderful opportunity to learn some things that would be important for our family down the road."

Higher-profile work in progress

Brainerd's children are now in college and she's been CEO of HealthPartners for nearly five years. As such, she's got more time to devote to community activities. She serves on 10 boards, including the Itasca Project and the Capital City Partnership.

Many of the appointments fit naturally with her values and life experiences. For example, she's a breast cancer survivor and chaired the St. Paul Chapter of the American Cancer Society. She prides herself on being involved in the community, and in finding volunteer opportunities for HealthPartners' employees. More than 1,300 of

COMMUNITY: Colleges call her a role model

her colleagues showed up when she was honorary chair for the American Heart Association's Twin Cities Heart Walk.

"I viewed that as a wonderful opportunity to contribute to the community and to engage HealthPartners' work force," she said. "It was easy to see why that one would be a priority."

"In thinking about Mary, there are two words that come to mind. One is courage, the other is perspective. I saw Mary having this broad perspective that looks at issues more broadly than just from a business setting."

Jon Campbell
Wells Fargo regional president

Brainerd's most visible community work at the moment is being done for the Itasca Project, an ambitious group of current and former business and nonprofit leaders aiming to solve many of the Twin Cities' biggest problems. The organization has several focuses and its leaders have not been chosen but have volunteered to head specific task forces.

Brainerd and Lynn Casey, CEO of Minneapolis-based Padilla Speer Beardsley Inc., have aggressively thrown themselves into studying and solving the issue of economic disparity in the Twin Cities, said Jim Campbell, retired chairman of Wells Fargo Bank Minnesota and Itasca's chairman.

"[Brainerd] reflects the legacy of former CEOs in this community who had enormous impact on creating this community and making the region we have today," he said. "We're very fortunate to have Mary in our midst."

Benefits for the company

Several leaders acknowledged that while they get involved in the community because it's the right thing to do, there also are tangible benefits for their companies.

"To me, working on the civic agenda, the nonprofit agenda, was something that ultimately helped the business," said Campbell, adding that HealthPartners benefits from Brainerd's work in the community.

"When you think about it, a healthy community is really good for her," he said. "The better the health of the people who live here, the better it is for her business."

Brainerd agrees. Providing better educational opportunities, for example, will help HealthPartners and other health care pro-

viders find future leaders and employees in an industry that has faced shortages.

"I see those connections as very clear," she said.

John Labosky, president and CEO of the Capital City Partnership in St. Paul, said Brainerd understands that community and business development work hand-in-hand. The partnership focuses on job growth and development in downtown St. Paul and he appreciates Brainerd's understanding of the community's needs.

The two have met with St. Paul's city council members at breakfast meetings in their respective wards. Labosky said Brainerd is committed to helping each district individually get the resources it needs to improve.

He also complimented Brainerd's commitment to the arts. She serves on the Guthrie Theater board. Also, she and husband Dick chaired a fundraiser for the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, which Labosky called a crown jewel that has struggled to make itself sustainable. A one-night event hosted by the couple helped raise \$450,000 toward its financial needs.

"She has a style that wears well with people over the long term," Labosky said. "She's a wonderful role model. Not just a role model for business leaders to follow, but I think she's a role model for young people coming into the workplace."

Kudos from colleagues, competitors

Brainerd has built a reputation in the Twin Cities that precedes her, but the president of Hamline University appreciates Brainerd simply for being a quiet, welcoming force.

Linda Hanson took the helm at the university in 2005, roughly the same time Brainerd joined the board of trustees. The two don't know each other well, but Brainerd immediately showed the new president around the local area and "helped a newbie navigate the corporate world," Hanson said. "I think she's a great human being. She has a great heart and a deep commitment to the Twin Cities."

There's no greater compliment than to receive kudos from a competitor.

David Page, CEO of Minneapolis-based Fairview Health System, said Brainerd is a leader both in the health care industry and in the community.

He cited her work with the Itasca

In the community

Current boards:

Hamline University
The St. Paul Foundation
The Guthrie Theater
Itasca Project
Capital City Partnership
Regions Hospital
Minnesota Council of Health Plans
Alliance of Community Health Plans
Minnesota Business Partnership
Possis Medical Inc.

Honorary chairwoman:

Twin Cities Heart Walk,
American Heart Association
American Cancer Society – St. Paul
Ordway Center for the performing Arts

Past boards:

College of St. Catherine
Mounds Park Academy
Metropolitan State University

Project, but the duo also have worked together on Safest in America, a nonprofit collaboration of leaders from several of the state's largest health care organizations that is focused on improving patient safety.

The group has created standards for surgical-site marking, preventing foreign objects being left inside bodies during surgery and other fundamental problems.

"Safety is going to grow in the right culture," Page said. "Mary is a part of this. She is a strong leader."

Not trying to do it all

While Brainerd acknowledges being busy, she said many of her board commitments don't take more than a couple hours a month. She has embraced her role as a leader in the community in part out of a sense of responsibility to live up to the local corporate tradition.

But she also has come to understand the importance of saying, "When." She's organized and balanced, but she won't take on a position if she doesn't think she has the time or energy to make a difference for a given organization.

"It's probably my challenge -- to actually say, 'No,'" Brainerd said. "That's the part I have to be careful about. If I make a commitment, I want to be able to do it well."

Andrew Telljohn is based in Minneapolis.