

I want my children to grow up thinking that a CEO can be a woman. In some ways, the reason I started the Center for Women & Enterprise (CWE) is as simple as that. I believe that women-owned businesses are an important tool for change. Female leaders in the corporate world challenge us to see beyond society's traditional gender roles, while, on a small scale, owning a business can give a woman the power to improve her life. While men have headed organizations for centuries, only recently have large numbers of women assumed this role. As more women begin to run businesses, they will need tools, training, technical assistance, and access to markets and capital. It is CWE's mission to provide this support.

CWE is a non-profit organization that helps women start and grow businesses, but more broadly, it seeks to address the growing feminization of poverty. Women, and their children, are disproportionately represented among the world's poor. Worldwide, women have less access to advanced education, training, and livable wages, yet they are more likely to be raising children on a single income. Divorce is a leading cause of poverty for U.S. women and children because often mothers do not have the job skills needed to support their families after a

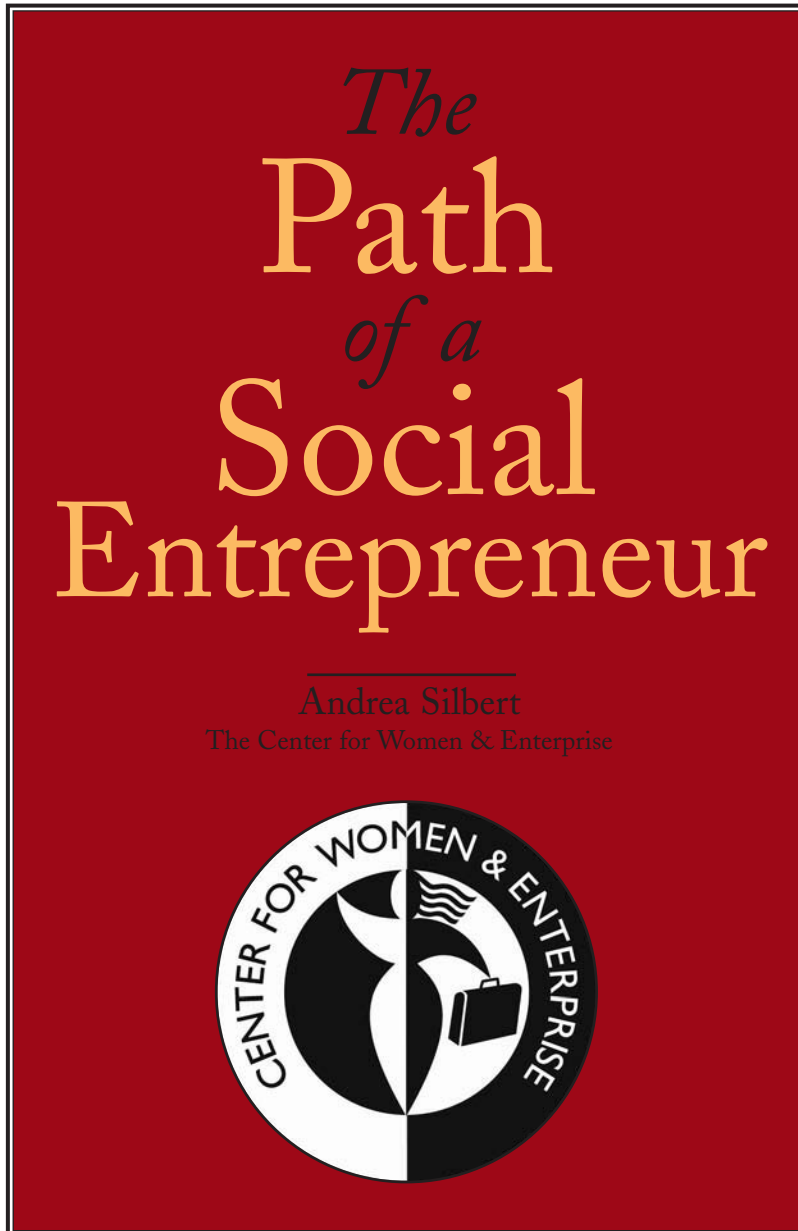
break-up. If we can give all women solid financial and business knowledge, we can break down the barriers to economic self-sufficiency and success.

In reality, my reasons for founding CWE are scattered throughout my life. I grew up in Brookline, Mass-

service and were career doctors with the Veterans Health Administration. From an early age, I discovered a love for social issues and politics, devouring the newspaper daily and getting involved wherever I was able.

In college, this interest in social issues combined reactively with a newfound passion for entrepreneurship. What began as a campus job in the advertising branch of a student-run company catapulted me into a major leadership role by my senior year, working over 20 hours a week as the president of Harvard Student Agencies. I loved it. Running a business was complex and fulfilling, and starting my own seemed like it would be an exciting challenge. After graduation, I took a job on Wall Street to strengthen my understanding of finance—knowledge I knew I would need as an entrepreneur.

Wall Street gave me invaluable skills, but the ultimate focus on the bottom line didn't fulfill my ideals. My interest in public service remained strong, and I searched for a way to combine my entrepreneurial vision with a service-oriented cause. I decided to take a job in Costa Rica, and the eye-opening experience exposed me for the first time to the plight of women in poverty. I went back to school and returned to Latin America equipped with a pair of



achusetts, with images of civic duty all around me. The community was active, and neighborhood families were always passionately involved in one public interest issue or another. My parents were dedicated to public



Andrea Silbert, Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Women & Enterprise.

masters' degrees, ready to focus on women and poverty.

A fellowship took me to Brazil, where I worked at The Passage House, a nonprofit organization with a mission to improve the lives of homeless "street" girls. My job was to help provide the girls with marketable skills, such as tailoring and catering, and create small businesses that generated income and allowed them to leave the poverty of the streets. It was the toughest job I have ever had. I saw too many women living on the very margins of society. Throughout the experience, however, I began to see small businesses as viable solutions to address poverty both abroad and in the United States. If we could help the poorest of women in Brazil, why couldn't encouraging American women to start businesses have the same uplifting effects?

With this in mind, I returned home in 1994 and took a job helping prospective entrepreneurs apply for small business loans at the nonprofit Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation in Roxbury, Massachusetts. I soon realized that American women needed more than loans and capital. In Brazil's informal economy, a woman could start her business by getting a loan, buying a pushcart, and selling her goods on the

street. She didn't have to negotiate complex regulations or face markets crowded with competition. But back in the United States, women entrepreneurs needed to be much more sophisticated to survive the highly competitive and regulated market. Education and training were crucial.

With this realization, I developed a vision for my first entrepreneurial venture: a comprehensive nonprofit center serving women in all stages of business growth. Early grants from the U.S. Small Business Administration and Bank of Boston funded our start-up and allowed us to hire a few dedicated staff members. We officially launched the Center for Women & Enterprise in 1995, and I had found a career as a social entrepreneur.

If we can give women financial and business knowledge, we can break down the barriers between women and economic self-sufficiency and success.

We started with one office in Boston and a budget of \$350,000, and we grew from there. We created the Community Entrepreneurs Program to train women who wanted to start businesses to achieve economic self-sufficiency. For established entrepreneurs, we organized networking opportunities and created advanced training programs focused on accessing capital and penetrating markets. We built a team of volunteer consultants to provide one-on-one business counseling to our clients, while extending them free legal advice through an innovative partnership

with the Boston law firm of Testa, Hurwitz & Thibault. I co-developed a national venture capital forum, Springboard Enterprises, Inc., to showcase women's fast-growth technology businesses. CWE also joined forces with the Women's Business Enterprise National Council to certify New England's women-owned businesses for corporate and government contracts.

Today, CWE has locations in Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, and serves over 1,800 women a year. Over 40 percent are low income, and nearly a third are single parents. Their businesses range from small start-ups that provide wages for their low-income owners to multi million dollar corporations. CWE has labored to develop a set of services that will fully meet their diverse needs over the lives of their businesses.

Becky Curboy first came to CWE when she was given the chance to lease a driving range. Divorced, on welfare, and with a rusty set of job skills after years as a stay-at-home mom, Becky knew she couldn't raise her four children on a minimum wage job, but decent earnings had been elusive. Running her own business was a promising route to self-sufficiency. CWE taught Becky the practical skills and business know-how she needed to successfully launch the Royal Springs Family Golf Center. Now, fully supporting her family on income from the



Group instruction at the Center for Women & Enterprise.



Training session at the Center for Women & Enterprise in Boston, Massachusetts.

business, Becky returns often to CWE for advanced services and training. Most recently, CWE helped her to secure a loan to buy the property she had previously leased.

Clients like Becky not only highlight the success of entrepreneurial training but also serve as inspiration to me. I am moved by the determination and dedication of individual women to succeed regardless of their economic disadvantages. Our clients also continually remind me that entrepreneurial education is a powerful tool for social and economic change. I believe that grassroots business development is important to New England's future. New paths to economic well being are needed for the region's low income workers, and fostering new enterprises can address this need and help the region's economy thrive.

All of my years of life, work, and study have finally meshed with my goals and ideals, coming together in this career of social entrepreneurship. And my journey continues. After

**The vision:
a comprehensive
nonprofit center
serving women in
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almost nine years at the helm of CWE, I've decided to retire as CEO in April and take on new challenges in the realm of family and small business social policy. The organization is at its strongest ever financially and pro-

grammatically, making it a natural time for a transition. CWE will continue to grow and is already heading in many new directions, launching initiatives to train displaced workers, spark college women's interest in entrepreneurship, and reach women in Spanish-speaking communities. Having watched our organization grow, I feel a true sense of pride in all that CWE has achieved. I will never forget the committed women, supporters, volunteers, and staff who have made, and will continue to make, CWE's success possible.

Andrea Silbert is Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Women & Enterprise. You can learn more about CWE by visiting www.cweonline.org.