

Larisa Miller - Changing the world through education and empowerment

By Fatima Gorezi



Larisa Miller is the CEO of Phoenix Global, LLC, a company focused on facilitating beneficial and sustainable business opportunities and investments, with specific focus on Africa, Eastern Europe and South America.

She has spent several years working for the Royal Family in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates as the business development manager, with focus on sustainable development.

Additionally, Larisa served as head of one of their large non-profit foundations, which focused on youth, literacy and education, working with women and children in refugee camps in the Middle East and Africa.

In addition to these roles, she is an international keynote speaker, addressing audiences around the world on sustainable business development and structuring, as well as the importance of impact investment and CSR. Her personal mission is to make a humanitarian impact through her commitment to social responsibility.



What can you tell us about your childhood and upbringing and how that has influenced you?

I grew up in beautiful Central Pennsylvania in the heart of Amish country, but I had an insatiable curiosity to see the world from the time I was young. An avid reader as a child, I discovered people, places, culture and history on the pages of books or in National Geographic, and as an adult, I endeavour to see as much of these off-the-beaten-path destinations as I can.

You are a woman of many parts, roles, and achievements: Entrepreneur, Keynote Speaker; Business and sustainability strategist; and advocate for the importance of CSR. Tell us more about these.

It's true that there are many parts and roles to my career path, and I am confident that I am moving in the right direction for this period of my life – one that allows me to make have an impact through strategic business opportunities, but also by making humanitarian impact through my commitment to social responsibility. There is a great personal gratification found in giving back and providing hope to those less fortunate, and that is a big part of my business ethos and personal strategy.

One life lesson that I've learned well is that life is unpredictable, and the path you think you will follow in your 20's will likely not be your pathway in your 40's. For sure, that's the way it has been for me. I've been blessed to have had the opportunity to live around the world, and thus, have been exposed to many new and significant experiences, people and perspectives. I've used these adventures to guide and shape the vision that I have for my own future, leading me to merge my experiences with my knowledge, to grow a global consulting firm focused on sound sustainable business investments, while measurably contributing to the well-being of others. The future of business must also have a conscience, so at Phoenix Global, we focus primarily on investments that benefit the sustainability of people and the planet. We explore projects which have the potential to

generate opportunity for youth; investments that innovate and promote technology, recognising that technology will be the driving force and common denominator in all sectors (agriculture, finance, energy, education, etc.) moving into the next decade; and we work with companies globally to concept creative and unique business strategies, helping them to realise greater profitability, while managing a more responsible footprint - truly making them a competitive business of the future.



Who has motivated and inspired you towards success?

Whenever anyone has asked this question in the past, my ready answer will always be my father, who is an icon in Pennsylvania agriculture, environment and politics, and my mother, who passed on her love of culture, history and travel. But as I get older, I realise that I am most shaped by the people I meet and interact with on my life's journey. There is a young man in Liberia who is 23. His parents were killed by rebel gorillas during their civil war when he was only 11-years old. At that tender young age, he was left to raise his one-year old twin brothers and two-year old sister. He would work on farms at night while they slept so that he could feed and clothe them. Now, twelve years later, his siblings remain in school and are healthy and well cared for, all because of the strength, tenacity and maturity of their big brother. He is a classic example of someone who realised how strong he was when being strong was his only option, and on days when I struggle be optimistic and would rather pull the covers over my head and hide, I think of this remarkable young man, and it motivates me to get moving.

There is a young girl in a refugee camp in Jordan with a singing voice like an angel. She has an infectious smile, and from her I learned that there are people who experience atrocities that I can't even imagine, and yet they can smile. This young girl watched her parents being murdered in front of her in Aleppo, Syria. She was left with no other family, so she is a true orphan. And yet, she sings and smiles. Because of her, every day I remind myself that there is no reason for me not to be able to find something to smile about.

In Mosul, Iraq, there was a small girl in a refugee camp who was so happy just to walk with me and hold my hand. It was quite cold, and she had no coat and mismatched shoes. We spent quite a bit of the day together, with sheer companionship and touch as our vehicle for communication, as we did not speak a common language. Towards the end of the day, she was asked by a friend of mine what she wanted. She responded that she didn't want anything, she had everything she needed. Here is someone who essentially has nothing, and yet wants nothing. She is truly grateful for everything that she does have, without lamenting that which she does not have. One of my biggest life lessons came from this little girl and this bold statement. We have everything we need, and yet we constantly want more – often failing to appreciate what we already have. Every day, when I think of her, I am reminded to be thankful and grateful, and that the small moments in life are actually our biggest rewards.



Why do you believe that continual personal development is so important for everyone?

It was once said that life never stops teaching, so you should never stop learning. Through the ups and downs of life, and unexpected shifts in our paths, the one thing that can never be taken away from us is our knowledge. When you continually develop yourself – learning new things and undertaking new experiences and hobbies, not only do you make yourself a more visionary, well-rounded and innovative professional, either as a business leader or team member, but you also have a constantly evolving and widening perspective which allows you to be more understanding and reflective as an individual and as a responsible global citizen. If we maintain our commitment to learning, through lifelong knowledge-

building, we will continuously refine our character, dreams and beliefs, allowing us to realise unimaginable success, both personally and professionally.

In your business, how do you qualify and decide which deals are the most strategic to pursue?

With sustainability being essential to all business models moving forward, we base our projects and investments off of a 'triple bottom line' strategy of people, planet and profits. We look at each project and opportunity to discern that it makes sense sustainably and has the potential for strong returns. Businesses can only be successful if they are economically sustainable, so the opportunities we explore must not only be good for the future of our planet, but have sound economics, as well. Additionally, we work with businesses to help them devise and implement sustainable strategies and plans which will position them to be prosperous while being good stewards of their community and the planet.

You have spent a few years working for the Royal Family in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, as a business development manager, with focus on sustainable development, as well as head of a large non-profit foundation, which focused on youth, literacy and education, working with women and children in refugee camps in the Middle East and Africa. What does this experience mean to you?

The UAE is a model to be followed by businesses and governments, globally. They respect and encourage women to make contributions in both the public and private sectors, and they encourage and reward concepts of future innovation – regardless of gender. Women, and the diverse perspective offered by women, are embraced and regarded as essential to a strong and thriving society and economy, and I was fortunate to work with many strong and visionary women.

Additionally, the UAE recognises the importance of education - literacy, technology, STEM, and they encourage all youth to embrace their access to quality education. Additionally, the UAE, and the Royal Family specifically, are exceptional humanitarians, believing that it is important for the "haves" to share with the "have-nots". It was my honour to be able to make a small contribution to a society who makes such a large philanthropic and humanitarian impact globally. It was through the experiences that I was fortunate to have whilst working in the UAE that shaped my present views and vision for my own future, and the legacy that I will leave for both my family, as well as for those less fortunate.

What is your experience from working with women – what is your opinion about their talents and skills?

Women possess strength, tenacity, courage and leadership. We are shameless multi-taskers, juggling professional responsibilities with family. At times, women are fierce and fearless, and other times they can be compassionate nurturers. Because we always feel the need to "prove" ourselves professionally, sometimes women have a tendency to sabotage

one another rather than support one another, and I believe that through organisations and groups such as Global Woman, which encourages a unity of women, we will build cross-sector support networks, mentoring one another, supporting one another, while forming life-long friendships which will allow us to continue to grow as business leaders and individuals. If we recognise the importance of our own uniqueness and originality, we will stop comparing ourselves with other women, as too often we measure our abilities based on others. Instead, we will focus on building our own talents, strengths and perspectives. A woman who confidently respects herself, embraces her own talents, cares for herself as much as she cares for others, and isn't afraid to have a different view or opinion from others – even if that view is unpopular - will be unstoppable.

How can we create more equality between men and women in the world, and how do we help women to feel more 'self-worth'?

For me, equality in the workplace means 'equally respected'. Men and women will never be "equal", as we are so different from one another. However, if we embrace these differences, respectfully working together, uniting our diverse perspectives and thought-processes, we will effectively end the need to discuss disparities in gender and equality.

As a woman, I believe that if we focus on our own personal development, constantly building our knowledge-bases, refining our personal traits such as patience, empathy, and perspective, and if we can encourage our businesses – either as leaders or employees – to appreciate and respect that men and women can 'work together' rather than feeling the need to compete with one another, we will create a more cohesive society, realise greater business success, and finally be able to do away with the preverbal and cliched concepts of "glass ceiling" and "gender balance".

As for how to help women feel greater 'self-worth', that is an internal battle waged individually. Helping women to improve their feelings of self-worth comes from giving them confidence by making them feel valued, respected and important – both in the workplace and at home. Having groups, clubs and working environments which allow women to interact with one another in a positive and encouraging manner will go a long way toward establishing, promoting and furthering a culture of confident, empowered women.

What are the qualities of an empowered woman? And how can women be empowered while maintaining their femininity?

Each woman has her own unique qualities based on her talents, interests, and education, so there is not a specific recipe that will empower all women. What inspires and drives me, will not be the same catalysts which will inspire you. By respecting one another, honouring our diverse perspectives, and embracing and supporting one another, we will create a global empowerment of all women.

A woman should never be ashamed to be “a girl”. Just because a woman is feminine, wearing high-heels and lipstick, does not mean that she is not equipped to be a strong leader, innovator or respected contributor. We are emotional, we are nurturing, we are soft and compassionate at times, but make no mistake, we can be equally fierce and tough when needed. Being feminine does not mean that a woman is not strong and powerful. Quite the contrary. Many of the greatest female leaders in the world throughout history have been authoritative, dynamic and forceful, while remaining ladylike. As women, it’s okay to have a bad day. It’s okay to be emotional at times. Cry it out if needed, then get back up and try again.

What are some tips would you give to people who feel like they can’t achieve their goals?

When we think of a goal, we often think of our grandest dream or vision, and that’s perfectly fine. However, too often, when we pursue this dream, as we meet with inevitable hurdles, losses or ‘failures’, we conclude that we will never be able to achieve our dream and we abandon it in favour of something easier. The solution to this, keeping us on the path to our utmost goal – no matter how lofty that goal is, is simple. Determine the grandest vision you have for your success, and then set many small and achievable milestones along the way. As you inevitably experience occasional setbacks, it’s the achievement of these small, frequent stepping-stones which will keep you on track to reaching your ultimate goals.

What is special in your lifestyle?

As a very busy mother and businesswoman, my lifestyle must be as flexible and ever-evolving as my immediate situation warrants. However, I always try to surround myself with people who support and encourage me – believing in me when I don’t necessarily believe in myself; making time for myself through my hobbies – which for me are quilting and calligraphy; and, I try to carve out a small bit of time each day to read. I admit that there are many days when I neglect to take time for myself, but overall, focusing on ‘me’ for a few minutes, allows me to be better as a mother; happier, more patient and abundantly more productive.

What ‘motto’ in life do you live by?

One of my best friends always jokes with me that my personal motto should be “Chaos, panic and disorder, my work here is done”, and while that is often true, the mantra that I firmly believe is “Don’t believe everything you think”. In a world where we are saturated with biased news, celebrities with opinions, and often incorrect beliefs that we have about one another, I endeavour to learn as much as I can about things which are unfamiliar to me, so that I see the world in a more objective and tolerant way. Travel. Spend money on experiences, rather than things. See the world, appreciating cultures, foods and landmarks. Respect that people are people, despite differences in language, tradition or religion. There are good and bad people – good and bad behaviours – in all countries and cultures.

Embrace the detours in life, which lead you to unimagined experiences, destinations and people, often missed by those who are too inflexible, fearful or distracted to see these diversions as opportunities. Put down your phone. Look up. SEE the world. Destiny will walk right by those who are too busy taking selfies.

What are your favourite places in the world from your travels and why?

I've learned valuable lessons and gained insight and perspective everywhere I've travelled. Marrakesh is exotic and magical; Paris is romantic and delicious; the snow-covered Alps under an azure sky never fails to take my breath away; seeing a pride of lions or a grazing giraffe in their own natural habitat in Africa is almost unimaginable; and, the flora and fauna on the island of Socotra, Yemen, where 33% of the vegetation ONLY grows there and nowhere else on earth, is exquisite. But, the place where I go when I need to re-center myself and cleanse my mind, getting lost in the cuisine, beauty and warmth of the people, is Budapest. My grandparents were Hungarian, and the food, music and ethnicity were important in my household. Hence when I am in Budapest, I feel closer to them, closer to my roots, and infinitely more peaceful.