Faces of Philanthropy: Jenny Baldock

Leading, Chairing and Serving the Community

By Michele Graham
Photography by ChiChi Ubiña

“I am interested in non-profit boards that provide a vital public service, ideally locally, where I feel I can make an impact. I look for boards that have positive, engaged board members, who also don’t take themselves too seriously or have a terrific sense of humor so that our time together is fun as well as rewarding.” For more than 25 years, Jenny Baldock has been making a notable difference in Fairfield County. From Greenwich Emergency Medical Services (GEMS) to Boys and Girls Club of Greenwich, from Greenwich Library to Brunswick, Jenny embodies a potent combination of leadership, intelligence, and compassion.

A native of Philadelphia suburbs and a Greenwich resident since 2001, Jenny grew up in a family with a tradition of service. Her grandfather is credited with helping to establish the Peace Corps, and her mother is a tireless volunteer who served, among other things, as Chair of the VNA (Visiting Nurse Association) and as a court-appointed advocate on behalf of impaired geriatrics. And while their contributions are enormous, it was her Grandmother Charlotte who made the earliest and most indelible impression on Jenny, especially when it came to helping neighbors. “My Grandmother’s impact was immensely personal and life-changing, and it made me feel I wanted to do that as well.”

After attending Princeton undergrad and Stanford Law School, and practicing law in New York City, Jenny channeled her energies into an impressive range of volunteer leadership roles:

- 17 years on the GEMS Board of Directors and current Board Chair
- 10 years at Greenwich Library, serving as President of the Board of Trustees and also chairing nearly every board committee. Before coming to Greenwich, Jenny also served as a Trustee of Darien Library.
- 7 years in various positions at the Boys and Girls Club of Greenwich, including as Trustee, Vice-Chair, and member of the Executive Committee and Audit and Scholarship Committee

And the list goes on, including chairing the fundraising arm of Brunswick School (her two sons’ alma mater) and serving on the Women in Leadership Committee at Princeton, as well as serving on a number of for-profit boards.
GEMS: jewel to the community

“In my 20’s, someone with whom I was traveling with died very suddenly; I’ve never been able to shake the feeling he might have survived had medical care been readily available. It was then I realized how much I took emergency medical services for granted. You never think you are going to be the one who needs the ambulance, until you do, and then you want it there within minutes. Unfortunately, in a lot of communities, that is not the situation.”

So, when the chance to join GEMS came along, Jenny jumped at it.

“I was delighted to learn Greenwich is one of the best places in the nation for emergency medical care. GEMS’ cardiac arrest survival rate, the primary litmus in emergency response, is outstanding. Our privately funded equipment is superior, and our staff is long-serving and highly skilled. These factors literally save lives and change outcomes.”

While Jenny doesn’t have medical training, what she does have is a legal background that’s helped her spot potential issues, analyze problems and synthesize solutions. It’s also helped her appreciate the benefits of talking through disagreements.

As the current GEMS Board Chair, Jenny is most concerned with expanding and improving the service. This includes expanding awareness that GEMS relies solely on private donations to fund all of its capital—every ambulance and all the equipment inside. In a climate of sky-rocketing ambulance and medical equipment costs, donations are crucial. Also, crucial is getting Station 4 on King Street rebuilt quickly. The station—located next to the Griff golf course—was destroyed in 2012 during Hurricane Sandy, and the staff has been in a FEMA trailer that has exceeded its useful life. Also weighing on Jenny’s mind is getting the ambulances into enclosed, heated spaces. Of the four stations, only one has an enclosed garage. At the other stations, ambulances must run at all times, and in the winter, must run space heaters to maintain the ambient temperature required for medications and patients. It’s not only expensive, and not always safe, it also substantially shortens the life of the ambulance.
A model for community ambulance services across the state

Being recognized as the top service in Connecticut doesn’t occur by happenstance. The four ambulance stations are strategically placed around town. This allows GEMS to respond within 5 minutes more than 70% of the time, and within 8 minutes 90% of the time. “Often, we do better than that, and our response times are among the best in the nation,” Jenny proudly notes. There are highly experienced paramedics and EMTs on every ambulance, which greatly increases the quality of care. And with staff who are part of the community, “Patients are treated with exceptional kindness and compassion, as neighbors, rather than ‘clients.’ GEMS only serves the Town of Greenwich for 911 calls. It is our service, without a profit motive, and results in the kind of partnership that allows for top service.”

Many are under the impression that GEMS is a department or arm under the Town of Greenwich. Not so.

GEMS is an independent contractual provider of emergency medical services. In 1986, after an extensive study into solutions for providing EMS coverage all across Greenwich, GEMS was established by a group of Greenwich residents as an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit.
“Prior to GEMS’ formation 32 years ago, if you needed emergency medical transport, you were put into the back of a police car or vehicles operated by volunteers. The only treatment you could receive on the way to the hospital was first aid out of the sort of first aid box you can buy at CVS.”

GEMS ambulances are like emergency rooms on wheels: paramedics can insert an IV, supply pain and other medications, take sophisticated heart readings, and connect readouts to the hospital from the road.

“When a patient arrives, the hospital staff is completely ready, saving critical, potentially life-saving minutes. This is one of the reasons Greenwich was the first town in the state to be deemed a ‘Heart-Safe’ community. Your chances of surviving a serious medical event, or coming through unimpaired, are vastly improved with GEMS.”

An integral part of Greenwich, GEMS also provides EMS orientation and CPR training across the school system, at corporations, and throughout the community. Last year alone, GEMS trained more than 4,500 people in CPR.
Words of advice on becoming a board member or chair

Having spent decades on boards, Jenny has seen the good and the not-so-good, the effective and the unproductive. It’s given her a clear perspective on what it takes to accomplish change and progress. She offers these six points for anyone considering joining a board or accepting a leadership role.

1. Be a good listener, committed to honest, respectful communication, open to suggestions and criticism from everyone, and to embracing perspectives with which you initially may have disagreed.
2. Be willing to ask “stupid” questions, challenge the status quo, but always in a respectful, kind way.
3. Be engaged, get to know the staff, and study the finances to understand the key issues and how best you may assist the organization.
4. As board chair, make sure the board has a diverse set of skill sets and perspectives, and that successors for all committee chairs and the board chair are in the wings.
5. As a board member, be a “do-er,” and support the organization’s fundraising activities, either as a giver, getter or event organizer, or support the organization through relevant expertise.
6. Support the organization publicly and spread the word that needs to be spread.

Spoken like someone who has done a lot and still has much more ahead that she wants to accomplish.