

Elaine Rogers

The Power of Giving Back

When she went to work as program director at USO Metropolitan Washington-Baltimore (USO-Metro) at age 24, barely a year out of college, Elaine Rogers had no idea that she would soon be the youngest president in the history of the organization. She also didn't realize the depths of the financial and administrative problems she would need to solve. But solve them she did, and in the process she fell in love with the organization and its mission. Today, 43 years later, she remains just as passionately committed to providing crucial support services for our nation's military service members and their families. That passion for giving back to those who have sacrificed for our country has empowered Rogers's leadership, helping her transform USO-Metro from an organization offering limited services with an annual budget of \$100,000 into the largest USO affiliate in the world, with an annual budget, at its height, of some \$14 million and providing a broad array of crucial social and other services: from emergency housing for military families to resiliency programs, such as Combat to Canvas, and transition programs for service members and spouses such as Project Next S.T.E.P. "Every day, I'm excited to go to work," Rogers says, "because I know I'm going to meet a hero."

One of the few USO affiliates operating continuously since the parent organization was founded in 1941, USO-Metro comprises nine locations and a "Mobile USO" facility that can literally take the organization anywhere it is needed in the Washington, DC-Baltimore metropolitan area. Including one of the largest USO centers in the world—the 25,000 square-foot USO Warrior and Family Center at Fort Belvoir, Virginia—USO-Metro's mission is focused on needs-based programs and services that include emergency food assistance, therapeutic and morale-building programs at area military hospitals, five family centers, and four lounges that

cater to the thousands of military personnel who pass through the airports in and near our nation's capital each year.

In 2003 USO-Metro launched Operation USO Care Package, a worldwide program that at the time was the first of its kind. By the end of the program in 2013, more than two million parcels were sent to deployed and deploying troops. "After 9/11, the American public could no longer send care packages to our troops overseas," Rogers explains. "That stopped, because no package could go over that hadn't been thoroughly verified for security."

Nevertheless, Elaine knew that those who were deploying as part of the War on Terror would still need the articles and supplies from home that many of us take for granted, but that provide much-needed comfort and convenience to our men and women in uniform. "One of the things I'm most proud of is that we were able to design and launch, in a single year, a \$10 million program to produce and distribute these packages. It was

the only secure program that the American public could donate to. We set up warehouses, volunteer networks, you name it. You see, basic things like socks, toothpaste, and such could no longer come from individuals because of the security concerns. So major companies like AT&T and others would send products to our warehouse, and thousands of volunteers would assemble the packages for shipping overseas to our troops. On one occasion, President Bush and Mrs. Bush came to one of our warehouses to help us stuff packages."

But USO-Metro didn't always offer such all-encompassing services. "Most people associate the USO with entertainment, such as when celebrities like Bob Hope would go overseas to put on shows for our troops during World War II," Elaine says. "And that was a central and very important part of our mission: supporting the



morale of our military personnel by providing entertainment, dances, social activities, and a touch of home to those who are often far from home and in harm's way." Soon after assuming the presidency of USO-Metro, however, Elaine saw the critical need for the USO to do much more if it wanted to remain true to its purpose during a time of sweeping change. "In 1976, when I became president, the Vietnam War was just ending. The military was going from being draft-based to an all-volunteer force. That was a huge difference, not only for the military, but also for an organization like the USO." The Vietnam era was a difficult time, not only for the US military, but also for support organizations like the USO. Indeed, as Rogers soon learned, USO-Metro was in danger of losing all of its funding. Additionally, the organization needed to expand its focus from serving the single service person to offering support to service members and their families. "The military wasn't prepared for this at all; they weren't used to having to deal with family members of personnel; the saying in the navy at that time was, 'If we wanted you to have a wife, we'd have packed her in your sea bag.'" Additionally, as the first woman president of the organization, Rogers faced an environment unaccustomed to female leadership, to say the very least. "The vast majority of the military leaders were men; all of the people on my board of directors were men, and here I was, a twenty-four-year-old woman, trying to help the organization succeed. I was taken off protocol lists, I wasn't invited to events where I could meet people who could help the organization, and my board really didn't understand what the USO needed to do in order to adapt to changing times."

Partly because of her youth and inexperience, Elaine says, she began making changes that, while desperately needed, rankled some of her more traditionally minded board members. "I was a young whippersnapper," she says, chuckling, "and I didn't even really understand what a board of directors was. I went ahead and made decisions and did all these things without asking anybody." When Elaine announced at her next board meeting that USO-Metro was halting its sponsorship of Saturday night dances that had been a longtime part of its programming, many of her board members, whose daughters had grown accustomed to the social opportunities afforded by being hostesses at the dances, were

rather displeased. When she informed her board that the organization was launching a number of outreach programs to support service personnel and their families, she again faced opposition.

Her response was decisive. "I told them, 'Why don't you guys take a little time to decide if you really want me to be the president of this organization?' I had started work there as program director about nine months previously, and then the president was fired, and the person chosen to succeed that president was also fired. So, I also requested that while they were deciding about me, they should have a qualified auditor come in and look at all the records and the books." The result of all this was that the board became convinced that, not only did they need a leader who was ready to make changes; they needed someone who was willing and able to help the organization turn on a dime, both financially and in terms of mission. "They decided to take a chance on me," Elaine says, "and thank goodness, it all worked out."

Indeed it did. During her tenure, not only has Elaine grown the annual budget 140-fold; she has also taken the roster of regular volunteers from 50 to more than 1,200 caring local citizens. "I love seeing volunteers who want to give back to our country," she says. "That is such an incredible part of my job: seeing the good in people who just want to help others. That's their total mission, and witnessing that on a daily basis is one of my greatest privileges." Those volunteers include the many celebrities who have been associated with the USO and its activities through the years. Elaine counts people like Bob Hope, Connie Stevens, Jon Stewart, Gary Sinise (*Forrest Gump*, *CSI: NY*, and others), Robin Williams, and Stevie Nicks (Fleetwood Mac) among those who have inspired and taught her about what it means to serve others. "I learned so much from these people," she says. "Connie Stevens taught me how to go into a hospital to visit wounded warriors. She told me, 'When you go in there, you smile, you talk to them, and you don't allow your emotions to get the better of you. Your job is to make them feel a little better, if just for a few minutes, so no matter how bad a shape they're in, you act like you're happy to see them.' That was a powerful lesson."

In fact, one of the most important objects Elaine possesses is a simple key ring, given to her by Bob Hope in appreciation for her help when he visited Washington, DC, early in her career. "I did a lot of different things with him, because he came

to DC a lot. He needed some help on one occasion, and I was able to do all that, and he gave me this key ring as thanks. It sort of became my good luck charm because of who gave it to me, and because it also reminds me of all the struggles I had, early in my career here." Another treasured memento is a letter of nomination for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, signed by all the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who were living at the time. "To have something like that from the highest commanders in our military is incredibly special to me," Elaine says, "because to me, it's an endorsement of my deep desire to help others."

Elaine credits her childhood and adolescence with helping her acquire the grit and self-sufficiency needed to succeed in those challenging early years as a young leader in a difficult role. "My parents taught me the value of working hard. Often in school—and especially in math—I wasn't the best student in the class, but I was the one who worked the hardest," she says. Growing up outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on acreage owned by her family, Elaine learned responsibility, in part, by caring for animals—especially the horses she loved. "I still have my riding boots," she says. "I rode competitively for a number of years, in English pleasure and hunter-jumper events. I kept at least one horse until I moved to Washington, DC." Elaine was also competitive as an athlete in school, another part of her life that shaped the person she would become. "I was never a big kid; even now, I'm less than five feet tall. I remember being bullied in school, and the girl who was bullying me was quite a bit bigger than me. But I was a gifted athlete, and I made up my mind, early in life, that I wasn't going to let a bully take advantage of me." She also benefited from a year spent at a boarding school in Switzerland as a ten-year-old, though at the time, the experience didn't seem like such a good idea. "I was the youngest student there, and I spoke very little French—which was the only language we were allowed to use in class. For a while, in every letter I wrote them, I begged my parents to let me come home." But Elaine's mother had attended the school as a young girl, and her parents sincerely wanted her to benefit from the expanded perspective that comes of living abroad. Ultimately, she says, she learned a tremendous amount of self-reliance from the experience, a quality that stood her in good stead when she was required to make decisions and stand her ground

during the early years of her leadership at USO-Metro.

Elaine believes that true leaders take responsibility for their work and empower others to do the same. "When you hire someone to do a job," she says, "you let them do it. If I have to do your job, then I don't need you. I have a very strong set of expectations, which I communicate. I want you to come to me when you need help, but I also want you to know that you have the freedom to make decisions and do your job." Elaine notes that she has learned from some wonderful mentors, especially those in the entertainment industry. "I've learned pretty well by now how to judge whether someone is a person I want to work with or not. In fact, I love knowing that if I decide a particular person is not someone who is interested in giving back to others, I don't have to work with them." She notes Bob Hope and Sen. John McCain, particularly, as key persons who have contributed to her understanding and appreciation of the sacrifices that our military is often called upon to make.

Elaine's advice to young people who are starting their professional journey begins with the importance of offering appreciation. "Thank people. My mother taught me the importance of sending thank-you notes, and I still do it to this day. Another important thing is to be kind to people. We all have trouble and rough spots in our lives, and you never know what the other person is facing. Kindness goes a long way in helping you get to where you want to go. Most people can tell if you're a good human being. It's so important to be conscious of what you're doing and saying." Elaine is concerned that too many young people today lack sufficient respect for those who have gone before, especially young women. "I tell them, 'The reason you have many of the opportunities you have is because women who went before you created the way forward.'" She is also concerned that, especially because of the all-volunteer military of today, many have lost their appreciation and understanding of the sacrifices that have been made in order to keep our country free. "I think presently that only about one percent of those in Congress have served in the military. So I am very concerned that we become more intentional about educating our young people about how our government works and about how important our military is to our way of life."

One need speak with Elaine for only a few

moments to understand that she is sustained and energized by serving those who serve our nation. “The most wonderful thing in the world is being the age I am,” she says. “I love the people who work for me, both young and old. They love what they’re doing and so do I. I am so passionate about serving our military and their families. I am very honored by the opportunity to work for the USO and to be able, in a very small way, to thank our military for what they do.” By giving back to those who have already given so much, and by empowering thousands of others to do the same, Elaine Rogers multiplies the power of gratitude to benefit those who need it most. In the process of helping our military heroes and their families, Rogers has become a hero to thousands of active duty service people, military veterans, and their loved ones.

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