

# Philanthropy Women

A Home for News and Conversation on Women Donors

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## The Domino Effect of Women Leaders: Fern Shepard, Rachel's Network



*Editor's Note: Fern Shepard is the first participant in our new interview series: "Feminist Giving IRL" (in real life).*

*"Feminist Giving IRL" features leaders in philanthropy and the nonprofit realm who are outstanding advocates for gender equity. Our first featured leader, Fern Shepard, is President of [Rachel's Network](#), a non-profit organization named after Rachel Carson that empowers women funders in environmental protection.*

### **What do you wish you had known when you started out in your profession?**

*I began my career 30 years ago as an environmental lawyer with Earthjustice, where I quickly learned the importance of strong laws in protecting vulnerable populations. Courts are where powerless people and voiceless wildlife and wildlands can be protected from harm. Yet our environmental problems have only grown in complexity and severity since I started.*

*I wish that I had understood back then what so many of us know now: the fight for a healthy and thriving planet depends on the broadest and most inclusive alliances that we can build.*

### **What is your current greatest professional challenge?**

*Despite significant accomplishments and deep investments by the environmental community and many others, scientists are delivering increasingly urgent news on climate change, biodiversity loss, food and water insecurity, and the adverse impacts of toxic industrial practices. According to recent scientific reports, the next 10 years are critical. We have arrived at a tipping point.*

*It takes a lot of research and discussion to build support for solutions within a funding network. This kind of deliberate work is needed for effective programs, so we must balance our deliberations with the urgency of the moment.*

### **What is your current greatest professional hope?**

*I hope to see even more women leaders! Women are now leading environmental organizations more than ever before, and more are sitting in their board rooms. I'm also encouraged to see all the women running for office. Our report, "[When Women Lead](#)," shows that women members of Congress vote for environmental protections more often than their male colleagues, and environmental issues are more salient to women voters in elections. Through our 501(c)4, Rachel's Action Network, we'll be endorsing a slate of strong women environmental leaders in 2020 from the national to state level.*

*To help launch the next generation of women leaders, Rachel's Network recently launched our new [Catalyst Award](#), which will provide up to five women environmental leaders of color each year \$10,000 in prize money and networking opportunities. There are so many women – scientists, community activists, journalists, teachers, artists, government staff and more – whose courage and leadership are going unrecognized in the environmental community, and we want to help change that.*

*Time and time again, the women in our network use their voices and resources to uplift other women and contribute toward solutions. It's gratifying to see their accomplishments.*

### **How does your gender identity inform your work?**

*Before coming to Rachel's Network in 2016, I'd never worked with an all-women staff, board, and membership. Women are good at leaving egos behind and coming together for a greater purpose. We're a group of people who want to get the job done!*

*When we were founded in 2000, Rachel's Network was one of the few voices highlighting the intersection of women's leadership and environmentalism. Now other organizations are beginning to see that elevating more women leaders in government, businesses and civil society is essential if we're to live sustainably on this planet.*

### **Do you think your gender identity has affected your career?**

*I am sure that it has. I began my career three decades ago as a litigator on behalf of small communities and environmental groups challenging federal government decisions benefiting large extractive industries. It was a combative, male-dominated*

*work-environment but, despite the challenges, I loved the work and the close friendships with clients and colleagues.*

*Leading Rachel's Network has given me the opportunity to experience a different work environment, and it too has been a joy. Overall, I am grateful that my gender identity has not prevented me from what matters most — contributing toward helping to build a healthy and thriving environment for all. I want others to have that same opportunity.*

### **How can philanthropy support gender equality?**

*I would encourage other funders to help get more women elected to public office, whether that's funding candidate trainings, publishing research or supporting campaigns. Women's leadership creates a domino effect because those women are inspiring others with their stories and empowering others through legislation. Just look at what's happening in [Nevada and Colorado](#), where women have achieved parity, or near parity, in their state legislatures. Those states are leading on policies like reproductive rights, paid family leave and clean energy legislation. That's not a coincidence.*

*If elections aren't your thing, there are lots of women leaders in the nonprofit space who deserve support. Ask your grantees about their policies around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). [Green 2.0](#) has been a great resource on this for those of us in the environmental field. We also like the work [As You Sow](#) and [Equileap](#) are doing to promote equality in the private sector through [gender-lens investing](#) and shareholder action.*

### **More on Fern Shepard:**

Shepard has over 30 years of experience in the environmental community. She was a staff attorney with Earthjustice and then a senior officer managing international lands conservation programs at the Pew Charitable Trusts. She has worked on issues ranging from securing threatened and endangered species habitat to protecting children and at-risk populations from lead contamination and dangerous pesticides. Fern also serves as chair of the board at Earthjustice and is a mother of three.

*Julia Travers - Posted on July 8, 2019*