

# Minerva Foundation born ready to battle for women

Paula Brook



Women gather with the aim of promoting leadership and opportunity for their own

The edgy-looking young woman greeting guests at the door of the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue took me by surprise. I thought this was supposed to be one of those lipstick 'n' heels fund-raising affairs — not lip studs 'n' jeans. What's the world coming to?

A better place, apparently. The Tuesday night event at Simon Fraser University's spiffy new downtown conference centre was to celebrate the launch of Minerva — a charitable foundation promoting leadership, education, economic opportunity and safety for British Columbia women.

All B.C. women, not just ones in suits. Which explains the one in studs. The post-modern fund raiser.

"Wasn't she gorgeous?" enthused Odlum Brown investment guru Nancy McKinstry, a Minerva founder and board chair. When I talked with her Wednesday, she was glowing in the aftermath of the well-attended and lucrative launch: more than 250 guests; the first \$50,000 toward a \$5-million endowment fund (half from Morris Wosk).

McKinstry spreads the credits around. For the po-mo greeter, she thanks her fellow board member Jessica Fraser, a 30-year-old video producer (Boneyard Films) who organized the front-door volunteer corps.

"We were very careful in putting our board together," McKinstry says, "trying to draw women from all different corners of the community."

Mostly, though, it was a who's who of the lipstick set: 50-something business women, professional fund raisers, politicians and socialites, with a little age and colour variation at the fringes.

Politically correct? Sure. Whatever it takes to raise awareness and money for good causes, and if anyone knows what it takes it's women like Lis Welch, the travel executive and fund raiser extraordinaire who had a big hand in raising the roof on the Centre for Dialogue and about whom retired SFU president Jack Blaney remarked: "No one says no to her, which is just as well considering she's always right." Another Minerva heavyweight is the unsinkable May Brown — octogenarian, longtime civic politician and "the ultimate matron" in McKinstry's estimation.

"We are centres of influence today," says McKinstry with unbridled pride, because it has taken a lot of hard work and patience for her and her peers to get to this place. "We can have an impact on others because we've earned our own financial security, and our own positions with our firms."

There was much anatomical talk on Tuesday evening — about legs up, and shoulders to stand on. Having achieved their goals, the Minerva women now recognize their responsibility to provide the boost needed by those still struggling — including



Nancy McKinstry, chairwoman of the Minerva Foundation, is bringing together women from every walk of life in British Columbia.

those for whom simply walking back to their cars at night is a frightening experience. That's 83 per cent of us, according to a recent survey. Afraid of taking public transit at night: 76 per cent.

Afraid of our own partners: no one knows because so many of us are too scared to talk. One in three Canadian women will suffer spousal assault in their lifetime. As many as 90 per cent of sexual offences are not reported to police. Aboriginal women between 25 and 44 years of age are five times more likely to experience a violent death than other Canadian women in that age group.

Progress? Yes we've made a lot, in some areas. Not in trades: only five per cent of apprentices are women (and sexual harassment drives too many out of their chosen fields). Not in senior management: of Canada's largest 560 corporations, only 12 are led by women.

We continue to defend the proposition that many women still need a leg up. Unfortunately, one must. And the Minerva members do, putting their own money (and hopefully some of yours) where their mouths are. So far, two projects have been approved for funding: education awards for single mothers at the province's six public universities, to assist with tuition, housing and childcare; and a Canadian Red Cross-coordinated abuse prevention program for aboriginal women.

The idea is to support organizations that are already doing good work in the community, not to replace or duplicate their services, says McKinstry. She describes Minerva as a catalyst and awareness raiser.

Why not throw your support and money behind existing foundations, I wonder? McKinstry dances lightly around her answer, careful not to dismiss the work done by the big guys on the block. "We got that question, at first," she says. "People told us, 'what

we don't need here is another foundation. I already support the Y, I support the United Way...' So we've taken a different tack on the whole thing. We're small and that's the advantage of working with us. You can be more involved in the process. You get a sense of being able to directly influence what happens in your community, and we think that's what a lot of women want to do with their money."

This isn't guesswork. McKinstry points to American studies showing women's distinctive patterns of giving, the dominant one succinctly summed up in a recent issue of *Business Week*: "This money is mine, I earned it and I control it."

With accumulated wealth comes the desire, for women, to shape society — especially in areas such as education and social services where they feel they have a personal stake in the cause. They want to leave behind not only their money, but their mark.

The Greek goddess Minerva is said to have leapt forth from the brain of Zeus — mature and armed for war. This week marks her rebirth. You've been warned.

For more information: 641-4905.

Many readers responded generously to Wednesday's column on Valerie Gaudet's life after brain injury, sharing their own stories of painstaking recovery. A useful resource is offered by the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, whose Web site ([www.otworks.com](http://www.otworks.com)) includes a service called "Ask An OT." Qualified occupational therapists answer questions on such subjects as how to cope with work and leisure following brain injury.

Clarification: The B.C. health ministry does provide a limited amount of funding for brain injury through regional health boards, including support for the Provincial Brain Injury Program.

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