

Tribute Award: Esque an advocate for women

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By Terri Finch Hamilton

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DeDe Esque's mom used to tell her she should laugh more quietly -- more like a girl. But she didn't listen.

Esque's vibrant, boisterous laugh is one of her trademarks -- along with her persistent, passionate voice that long has spoken out to boost others.

After working as manager of operations and grant making at the Nokomis Foundation, Esque last summer was named president and CEO of the foundation that supports women and girls.

It meant Ms. Behind the Scenes had to, in her words, "put on her big girl pants and step out front."

All the better to hear her. Because she says things like this:

"You help a woman, and you help the world. They are the ones who have the children, who take care of families. Globally, if we take care of the women and the children, we help the world. It might not always be this huge wave of change that you see. But we can do it, one by one."

Nokomis has funded a staggering array of projects, from the pioneering nurse examiner program for sexual assault victims at the Grand Rapids YWCA to a program that helps local women in jail turn their lives around.

They've funded female wheelchair athletes, women recovering from domestic violence and an 18-month study of prostitution in Grand Rapids that helped the community see prostitutes as real women with faces and families to support.

Esque, 47, is an adventurer who kayaks, beat drums inside the Great Pyramid in Egypt and lived with Bedouin women in the Sinai desert for two weeks.

While she gets paid to be an advocate for women and girls, Esque has done it for years for free. Her community service always has focused on girls and women, she says, from Girl Scouts to the Michigan Women's Foundation.

Armed with a clipboard and her huge smile, she's registered hundreds of new voters at farmers markets, bus stations and area festivals. She's been working to re-energize the Grand Rapids chapter of the League of Women Voters.

She has supported the health care rights of women through a longtime commitment to Planned Parenthood as a board member, donor and volunteer.

A certified master gardener, she is active in Mixed Greens, a nonprofit organization that brings vegetable gardens to urban schools. She's been a facilitator for the Institute for Healing Racism and the annual Summit on Racism. As a little girl, kids teased her about being half Japanese and half white. She hates name calling.

How does she choose where to help?

"I'd like to say it's a well-thought-out process, but it really hasn't been," Esque says. "It's a heart thing. It's what makes my heart beat."

"Or, I'm really ADD," she adds with a laugh.

"Personally, as a woman, there are times I could have used somebody to help me navigate through the darkness," Esque says. Her advocacy, she says, "is driven by justice. Ever since I was a kid, I thought things should be fair for everybody. That's what moves me. And I think voice has a lot to do with it -- speaking for folks who haven't had a chance to give voice to their issues."

"I'd like to think most of us are doing work that's not about us," Esque says. "It's about the cause. It's about the people."

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