Entrepreneur
Philanthropist
Global Educator
Trustee
Adviser
Innovator
What I’ve learned is that life is a progression where you learn different things at different stages. After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno, I moved with my husband, Leonard, to the San Francisco Bay Area. We co-founded a software company (Century Analysis, Inc.) that we managed for 23 years, seeing it evolve and grow to significant size.

Looking back, I recognize the value of our employees and their individual contribution to the whole and how important that contribution is for any entity to succeed. I also recognize that many of our key employees were educated, thoughtful individuals who not only used their education for academic endeavors, but also for thinking, reasoning and continuing to learn.

For me, the seed of philanthropy started with travel. When we had our company we did a lot of international business and traveled mostly to westernized countries, but also to some developing countries. I saw the contrast between the ease and availability of education in westernized countries—where a large percentage of the populace has access to higher education, which in turn greatly impacts the economic level of those countries—versus developing countries where education is less available and not as many people receive it. I started to see the correlation between an educated populace and what it can do for a person and a country.

A big catalyst for starting our foundation, Educational Pathways International, was a trip to New Guinea. We travelled to a remote part of the country down a river, far from any large town. We visited an elementary school where the school children gave a performance. We looked out over a sea of children and there was one girl who stood out—she was more animated and seemed interested in giving a better performance than the others. My thought was that here’s a child who will probably never have a chance to leave this village and get an education. What could she do for her country if she had an education?

Our thought was that if we could help the best and the brightest in a developing country to get a higher education, then potentially they could help contribute to their country and its growth.

Later, we were introduced to Ghana in western Africa as the country to start our work. We now offer university scholarships for gifted students of need. We search for the brightest students who come from the most remote, impoverished areas and give them an opportunity to get an education in their own country. Upon graduation, there is a requirement that they stay in Ghana for at least two years with the hope that they establish themselves in a long-term, in-country career. We have a group of students who just finished their first year with grade point averages ranging from 3.6 to 4.0.

Education resonates when you have a company with a strong base of educated employees who enable your organization to be more successful. A more educated populace helps a country be more prosperous.

A lot of students don’t finish college, but it is important to persevere. The discipline does not matter. You learn your subject matter, but you also learn how to think, question and work through problems. If I had been asked as an undergraduate at Nevada what my life would be like, I never would have imagined the path it took. I never dreamed that I would be working with engineers, as a result of starting a technology company. My majors in English and journalism taught me comparative and interpretive thought, which benefited me greatly in my company. Life is not a straight line and being willing to be flexible is very important.

From a conversation with Sara Lafrance in September with director of foundation operations Crystal Parrish. Lafrance, a 1973 English and journalism graduate of the University of Nevada, Reno, is the 2010 Foundation Board Chair. She is president of Educational Pathways International, an education-focused charitable foundation she and her husband, Leonard, founded in 2005. From 1975 to 1998, Lafrance served as president of Century Analysis, Inc., a software manufacturer that provided integration solutions to large commercial, industrial and healthcare enterprises. Since moving to Nevada in 1998, Lafrance has served on and chaired many local boards, including the University of Nevada, Reno College of Engineering Advisory Board; the University of Nevada, Reno Foundation Board; KNPB Channel 5 Public Television; and the Reno Philharmonic. She is a member of Siena Angels and involved with READ Global and Guide Dogs for the Blind. Sara and Leonard also provide scholarships for three National Merit Scholars at the College of Engineering. She holds a master’s in organizational change from Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York.