

A group of people, including Belinda Stronach, are holding up a large white net in a rural setting. The net is being held high, and the people are smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a dirt path and some trees.

Few Canadians have had as meteoric a decade as Belinda Stronach. In 2001, she was appointed CEO of auto-parts manufacturer Magna International, shortly after which the National Post anointed her Canada's most powerful businesswoman. The following year, with Magna growing under her leadership, Fortune Magazine ranked her #2 in its list of the world's most powerful women in business.

A CONVERSATION WITH BELINDA STRONACH

Agent of **CHANGE**

By 2004, she was heavily entrenched in politics, cited as a key architect behind the merger between the Progressive Conservative and the Canadian Alliance parties. Though she would lose the leadership race for the newly formed Conservative party to Stephen Harper, coming in second, her political aspirations were clear. She was elected as the MP for Newmarket – Aurora in 2004 as a Conservative before famously crossing the floor a year later, retaining the seat as a Liberal in the next election. In 2007, following a diagnosis of breast cancer, she announced that she would not seek re-election, choosing to return to Magna.



Opposite: Belinda & Seamus O'Regan of CTV Canada AM in Liberia.

Today, having survived cancer and leaving an indelible impression on Canadian politics and business, Belinda has set her sights on some of our most pressing global challenges. Under her guidance, The Belinda Stronach Foundation is addressing a number of issues facing Canada and the developing world, particularly as it relates to malaria and women's rights to education and health. With an address book that includes political heavyweights like Tony Blair and enterprising celebrities like Gene Simmons, Belinda is using her platform to make a difference at home and abroad.

COLLECTIONS' Jeremy Finkelstein recently sat down with the engaging Stronach to discuss her Foundation, the recent G20 summit, and her experience in politics and business.

C: How did you come to form the Belinda Stronach Foundation?

BS: In 2005, I had this amazing opportunity to travel to Africa with (renowned economist) Jeffrey Sachs. I asked Rick Mercer to accompany me, and over ten days we went to Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Uganda. We met presidents and ministers but we also went to the very remote and impoverished areas. We saw firsthand some of the development challenges, but we also learned about some solutions. When Rick and I returned home, we put our heads together and asked, "what can we do that will make a difference?" We picked the low hanging fruit at the time, which was the cause of bed nets to prevent malaria. We liked it because it was tangible, there was a simple solution, it was affordable, and there really wasn't awareness about malaria, which is the number

one killer of kids in Africa. So we enlisted support and developed Spread the Net, and I'm really proud to say that we achieved our first goal of 500,000 nets this past April.

Spread the Net grew and it had so much potential that I wanted to put a formal structure in place. I convinced Farah Mohamed to join me, and we organized a team that took on Spread the Net as the first challenge, but we also wanted to do a number of other things. Today, we really have three areas of focus. One is the global health piece which includes Spread the Net. We also wanted to do something with girls and women. Back in 2002, I funded a study through the Centre of Global Development in Washington and it showed that 60 million girls didn't have access to a primary education. Being a woman and a mother, this was of great importance to me. I think it's important that we look at the intersection between women and political empowerment, but that we also enable women to have the economic freedom to be able to make choices. And for the third piece of the foundation, we wanted to do something domestic, so we decided to focus on Aboriginal youth. We wanted to make sure they had the same opportunities as other kids: access to internet, access to computers. As a parent, it's hard to imagine your child not having access to this important educational tool and information. So we're partnering with One Laptop per Child and our goal is to provide every Aboriginal child (aged 6 – 12) in this country with access to one of these laptops. We're launching a pilot this fall.

C: You've chosen global affairs, girls, and Aboriginal youth as your three pillars. Is there a common link between these seemingly disparate agendas?

BS: A lot of it focuses on enabling young people and making sure they have access to good health and good education. You need good health, because otherwise you just don't survive, but in the case of girls and women, it's through education where the big differentiator occurs. That's where the big step in income occurs for young women in developing nations. A great statistic out of the World Bank shows that when a woman earns an income, she gives about 80 to 90 percent of that back to her family. Her kids are better educated, they're healthier, and the community benefits. In comparison, the typical male counterpart contributes about 30%, so it makes great economic sense.

C: You've cited maternal mortality reduction as a key opportunity for Canadian leadership. Why is this the issue for Canada?

BS: Because a lot of headway had been made by various NGOs and developing countries, and because it's another one of those low hanging fruit issues, in terms of the number of lives that can be saved by very simple means; better education, health, reproduction education and better access to facilities within which to give birth. Healthier mothers lead to healthier children and less mortality.

C: Did Canada's response during the recent G20 Summit meet your expectations?

BS: Well we'd always like to see them go further because certain issues with respect to reproductive health weren't fully dealt with; but on the other hand, you have to be practical and you have to recognize how much good work and progress have been made. So I'm happy that it was on the agenda, I'm happy that good work was amplified. But we can always go further in terms of investing in other countries. The wealthier countries have to step up to the plate and make sure that we don't slide backward. We don't want to lose our focus on Africa or neglect our obligations there. But Canada, in terms of its international financial commitments, is showing good leadership.

C: Can we ensure that questions around maternal health don't end up in a polarizing debate over abortion?

BS: It's a difficult subject matter. Having said that, I think there are realities we must face and I think we can't have our heads stuck in the sand when a great percentage of deaths are due to unsafe abortions. So I think true leadership is recognizing the reality and trying to accommodate the various interests, but also offering choice to those women who need to access abortion. It's a matter of choice, and then it must be done in a very healthy and safe manner.



G(irls)20 Summit – Belinda with delegates from Saudi Arabia, Italy, Russia, Japan, Brazil, Turkey and Australia

C: You recently held your inaugural G(irls)20 summit in Toronto. What was the response to the initiative?

BS: The response was amazing. We had 20 girls from the various G20 countries plus a young woman from Malawi. They were bright, articulate, and they knew the issues. It was incredible how easily they worked together to prioritize what some of the issues they felt needed to be addressed - education being a big one that they all rallied around, as well as sexual and reproductive health education. With respect to education, in a very practical way, they suggested the need to address in the textbooks the way women and girls are depicted so that the mindset is correct at an earlier age. But it doesn't end there. The young women are currently working on specific proposals that they'd like to adopt, and we will support them with the tools to do so in their home countries. Our goal is to have a (G)irls20 summit before every G20 meeting. Next year it will be in France.

C: How have your experiences in business and politics shaped your outlook?

BS: There's no question that having an appreciation for how business works is a good thing. That's the driver of our economy; it's what creates wealth, and if you can't create wealth, you can't afford to have a good social infrastructure, a good educational system and a good health care system. Having an appreciation for how government works is also useful because once you're in it, you certainly learn what works and what doesn't. It's also a great platform to be able to connect with other leaders globally and to develop relationships. When changes need to be made, it's great to be able to call up individuals from other countries and develop solutions to complex problems together.

C: How can our readers become involved in your foundation?

BS: We feel that it's important to have broad based support and that it's the best way to make change. I would encourage readers to go to our website, see if there are areas of interest that they'd like to get involved in, and we would be happy to accommodate that. We are always open to new ideas that align with our objectives. And we love supporting young people. Young people who are enthusiastic about making a change in this world and have innovative ideas, we would welcome greatly.

C: Do you have any advice for young women looking for a career in advocacy, politics or business?

BS: Don't be afraid to dream big. You have to have that dream, set that goal and go for it. Don't wait for everything to be perfectly aligned; it's possible to figure things out along the way. And stick with it. We all have those days when we want to give up, but the key to great success is sticking with it, staying focused and thinking innovatively. Just don't be afraid to set that goal and that dream.