



# WRITING *a Book,* LAUNCHING *a Movement*

Could seeing the best in others  
make your life better?

Retired Caterpillar executive

**Michele Sullivan** thinks so.

LIFE, AFFIRMED

BY MARY BROLLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY MICHELE SULLIVAN

⌚ 5 MIN.

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When **Michele Sullivan '87 MBA '89** was a teenager, she entered a citywide chess tournament in Peoria. At first overwhelmed with the scale of the venue and the number of competitors, she decided to take a deep breath and tackle the challenge.

After navigating the huge auditorium to find her match and hoisting herself onto a stool to play, she cheerfully introduced herself, then beat competitor after competitor, eventually winning the junior division championship. Opponents went from open derision to quiet respect, and the crowd cheered raucously for her.

This vignette from Sullivan's just-published memoir, "Looking Up: How a Different Perspective Turns Obstacles into Advantages," illustrates how she overcame serious challenges to become successful.

Published in February, the book spurred profiles on Sullivan in *People* and *Forbes*. She will embark on a nationwide book tour and then will continue her chief post-retirement gig — an impressive set of speaking engagements.

Born in the 1960s with a rare form of dwarfism, Sullivan said her parents were advised by their doctor to "take her home and treat her like anyone else."

And they did, returning to their modest home in East Peoria, Ill. Her close-knit family of five bonded over dinners and conversation at the kitchen table and imbued her with a sense of stability and confidence that has sustained her ever since.

Her work ethic, smarts, sense of humor and self-possession would have made her an asset to any company or organization. Indeed, she had a long and successful career at Caterpillar Inc., ending with her retirement as president of the Caterpillar Foundation in 2018. But because she is a little person, she was continually forced to prove herself to doubters.

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Sullivan relates stories of public ignorance and mockery about her condition, physical pain and arduous medical treatments that required separation from her family, and accessibility challenges at school and work. Throughout, she credits the love and support of the many people who championed her at home, at school, at the hospital during medical treatments and in her career.

And that's why Sullivan wants to create a movement to encourage people to respect, see the best in and not take for granted those around them. To accept their interconnectedness.



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She's one of those people who is totally present and in the moment. She takes in every detail, listening like a hawk, before swooping in with her point, every time very astutely made.

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U2 lead singer and philanthropist Bono, in *People*, Feb. 26

## PHILANTHROPIC LEADERSHIP AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Simply put, Sullivan hopes to encourage people everywhere to look up to others. It's something she's done her whole life — first by default, then by choice.

At Caterpillar, Sullivan experienced many aspects of the business, including facilities, dealerships, marketing and products. Then, when she was named president of the Caterpillar Foundation in 2011, she wore another hat: director of Corporate Social Innovation for the company.

"I had two titles, two business cards," she said. "I was in charge of the company's social investments, and the foundation was independent from that."

In determining the foundation's investment strategy, Sullivan always made sure it was looking at the root causes of poverty and hardship so that its financial and consulting assistance would be most effective.

Her work took her all over the world, to tiny villages and huge cities. As the face of a powerful foundation, she met many influential people, including Bono. Sullivan considers the Irish rock star a friend. In the book she relates a story of him asking her to chase him around the room in her wheeled scooter (to get his energy up) during a break in a board meeting for his ONE Foundation.

President Obama nominated Sullivan to be a U.S. delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which she considers the highlight of her career.

"It was such an honor, and it was my way to help. I went to the White House often. I was invited there to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"Sometimes I'd ask myself, 'How did I go from Washington, Ill., to Washington, D.C.?'"

## NEXT STEPS FOR THE MOVEMENT

To make her vision of the "Looking Up" movement come to life, Sullivan knows she needs help. So she's enlisted Bradley students and faculty.

Becky Wood, instructor of management and leadership, said Sullivan presented the concept of "Looking Up" to a group of deans, explaining the movement she hoped to create and asking for ideas of how to promote it.

"We discussed strategy, with good ideas coming from several colleges," Wood said. "A few I remember were a possible 'Looking Up' documentary, a coordinated social media push and the development of an app for the movement. Michele (believes) 'Looking Up' could become a concept as well known as 'Life is good.'"

This collaboration, which led to a meeting with a group of students, is an example of Sullivan's deep and lasting connection to her alma mater. She has mentored Bradley students, including speaking to MBA classes.

Lately, however, she's been busy with all that a national book launch entails. "I went to Nashville in November to read the book for Audible," she said. "I had done voice-over work before, so I was confident I could do it. It was over two days, probably 10-11 hours. If you make mistakes, they have you go back and do it over."

Why write the book now?

"I wanted to tell the story of some of the people who inspired me. In today's world, I think the book is going to hit a nerve." **B**