

Interview with Stephanie Berger, Region 8 Vice President, former CAHU President, and Founder of Ellevate Foundation

Sue: What is Ellevate and what is its relationship to CAHU/CAHIP?

Stephanie: *Ellevate is a brand new nonprofit educational foundation that was formed in order to provide grant money to women that are starting out in our industry, to help them be able to go to events and kickstart their careers in a way that many of us were unable to. The relationship to CAHIP is that in 2019, CAHU hosted the first Women's Leadership Summit. It was then put on again in 2022, also hosted by CAHU (now known as CAHIP). Moving forward we are going to be putting this event on through the Ellevate Foundation, not through CAHIP anymore.*

Sue: When did the idea for Ellevate Foundation first pop into your head? Was it simultaneous with Women's Leadership Summit?

Stephanie: *No, it wasn't at all. I turned 40 during the pandemic and a group of my friends and colleagues put together a sum of money and gave it to me to start a scholarship. In researching scholarship funds, laws and the IRS, I quickly learned that we could do grants, not scholarships. So, the idea for Ellevate was always there. Then, in some of the planning with CAHIP, they decided to go another direction with their leadership events, so it made sense to take the women's leadership event and put it under Ellevate. That way, any profits earned could be funneled through the nonprofit and given back to women in the industry.*

Sue: Was that part of your long-term vision for Women's Leadership Summit, to eventually separate it, because I know it's also gone national? Were you expecting that? Or was it a surprise?

Stephanie: *When we started WLS in 2019, we always had the idea that it would grow and expand beyond our industry. We always thought that it would morph into something else, but we weren't sure how, so we gave it to the universe. I think that it just happened the way it was supposed to happen.*

Sue: The first Women's Leadership Summit. I was there so I should remember, but were you surprised or not surprised that it went beyond California almost immediately?

Stephanie: *You know, I always have been surprised by this. This idea started at a birthday dinner in Washington, DC. A group of us, at that point, were just chatting about having a retreat. We thought it would be an Airbnb with maybe five or ten women, where we could get together, share ideas and talk about growth and best practices amongst each other. It was my last year, my Past President year of CAHU at the time, and I called it my last "giveback." The idea sort of just morphed among our group of women, so I brought it to the Board and that's how it was born. I feel so fortunate that along the way there has been an amazing group of women that have shared this vision. Then the first WLS happened and then it came back in 2022. Korey (Ashton) and Cerrina (Jensen) did a fabulous job of heading the event for 2022. Now we are heading into 2023 and it's all clicked and made sense to host the event through the foundation.*

Sue: What do you see as the future for Ellevate and then for WLS? They do have different missions, right?

Stephanie: *They do. I think WLS will always live with Ellevate, so to speak. The event will be the main funding for the Ellevate grants. I envision the event will happen annually. How it looks and how it morphs in the future? We'll see.*

The first event, we limited very strategically to 100 participants. It's grown quite a bit since then, so who knows how it will grow in the future? Ellevate will eventually branch out and do some other fundraising in order to be able to provide more grants. The grants will be available for any industry-wide events, so it's not limited to CAHIP or NABIP. They're expensive when you first start in this industry. Many of us didn't have money to go to Washington or Annual Convention, so this is just a way to help newer women to hopefully grow into leadership roles.

Sue: One of the things I've noticed being involved with WLS, is that last year, when we were finally able to have the second one three years after the first, was the large number of first timers. When it was asked, "how many people are here for the first time?" I was stunned at how many hands went up. So were you. Are you expecting even more new first timers this year? (Stephanie nodded.) That must make you feel incredibly proud that women who are first-timers are finding this event, and finding mentors and women to look up to for leadership.

Stephanie: *And it's incredibly humbling that this little idea has grown so much and is affecting so many women. I really do think, from talking to women that have come to WLS, that it's life-changing for them. They meet other women that they wouldn't have met otherwise and they come out of their shell a little bit. We are helping to develop leaders. It's exciting!*

I'll tell you a little story. Today, we had five registrations come through and I can see the Inbox on my phone. And you know what? I loved it because I didn't know any of them. I had to go on LinkedIn and look them up!

Sue: Oh wow, and you know everybody.

Stephanie: *I do feel like I know a lot of people, but that's why this was so exciting for me. That we have a lot of women that I don't know. We have women, right now, registered from over 12 states, which is really amazing.*

Sue: Wow, ok, I didn't know that. That's cool.

Stephanie: *Yeah, it's really cool. I'm counting! I had this little vision that maybe I'll put a map up and we can put pins on it to show where people are coming from. It's all over the country.*

Sue: So that really bodes well for the future of WLS. That's amazing!

Stephanie: *I think so, and I think that it's it bodes well for our industry, too. The thing that I really, really want to drive home with this, is that this is a passion project, we are all devoting a lot of time to this because we believe it can change our industry. It's something that I have felt passionate about*

for a really long time and I want to see it through. Also, there's no ownership by any state, right? Now that it's with this foundation, the money can go anywhere in the country. We hope women from all over the country will come. Once we open the grants up, anyone will be eligible to apply for any event that is an industry event that meets our criteria for professional development.

Sue: So the woman who's reading this interview today, where can she go if she's new to the industry and excited?

Stephanie: *Our website is www.Ellevatefoundation.org. It's important to note that Ellevate is spelled "ELLEVATE." Right now, we currently don't have active grants because we're still doing the first event, but you're welcome to e-mail us. The e-mail is hello@Ellevatefoundation.org. We're hoping that in early 2024 we'll be able to start giving.*

Sue: Awesome! Thank you, Stephanie. Any final thoughts you'd like to share with the CAHIP membership?

Stephanie: *Registration is still open until February 15th! The event is March 13-15. If you haven't registered yet, it's going to be a really great event. The speakers this year are fabulous and we're so excited that we already have one keynote inked for 2024!*

Sue: I saw some of the potentials for 2024. I was like, "What? Already? Yeah!"

Stephanie: *The speaker lineup is fabulous and just the fact that these women want to come and be on our stage is amazing to me. There are some longtime leaders in there.*

Thank you for the opportunity and for getting the word out about our foundation.

Sue: Thank you for your time! To wrap this up, so folks know, the reason we're focusing on Ellevate, is because March is Women's History Month and we want to celebrate the founding of an organization like Ellevate Foundation and what it means to women in our industry.