

# How to be a maverick

'Blind Side' muse, key speaker at women's conference, calls for less talk and more action

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Author Michael Lewis tends to favor stories about mavericks. So, when he penned "The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game," his maverick meter no doubt pegged out when he met Leigh Anne Tuohy.

Tuohy, played by actress Sandra Bullock in the 2009 movie version of the book, is a key speaker at the 2012 Women's Conference on May 17 at the Moody Gardens Convention Center in Galveston. And tickets are going fast.

Tuohy and her husband, Sean, took in Michael Oher, a homeless, African-American teenager, and provided him with shelter in their Memphis home.

With their help, Oher also got an education and an opportunity to qualify for NCAA Division football. The couple eventually adopted him.

Although Oher's journey is heartwarming, it also became an important one for the Tuohy family. The family saw an opportunity to spread the word about how everyone has the potential to make a difference in others' lives.

In a recent telephone interview, Tuohy spoke about her life, her background, her family and how everyone can be a "cheerful giver."

**Q: The theme of this year's conference is "From the Sole." What's it like to walk in your shoes?**

**A:** Some days I wish everyone could walk in my shoes; and some days I wouldn't want anyone to have to bear the burden. Our foundation ("Making it Happen") gets thousands of requests, and when we start reading through them, it breaks your heart, because there are so many people hurting in this country. But then there are days that we make great strides, move mountains, and I wish everyone could know how wonderful it feels to make a difference in someone's life; then watch them go out and help someone do something to help someone else.

**Q: You make no secret about being raised in a racist household. When did you come to realize that color didn't matter?**

**A:** At a very young age. My dad was a federal marshal who transported prisoners. I saw things that went on and would think, "That's not right." Do I think the culture has changed? Yes. Do I think there is still great room for change? Unbelievably so. We've made strides, but we still have so far to go. I see racism everyday; I live it, I watch it, I hear it — it's done to me.

**Q: Two years ago you spoke at the Bay Path College Women's Leadership Conference in Springfield, Mass., and said that the "kid who knows the cure for cancer is prob-**



ably walking the streets of inner-city Springfield right now." How can we find those children in inner cities across the United States?

**A:** It's not hard. The view behind you is a lot different than the view in front of you. The two words "turn around" are very impactful to us because that's all we did — turn our car around (referring to offering a poorly dressed Oher a ride after a snowfall in Memphis). So, we just have to choose to get involved; either stay on the sidelines and watch or get in the game. I always say, "Put your shoulder pads on and let's go!"

**Q: How and when did you know that Michael was going to be successful?**

**A:** As a family, we are all very driven, so he was emulating what he knew and what he saw: a father

who got up and went to work every day and worked hard at what he did, loved life and loved people. We just provided a recipe for success because we believe that anybody can be successful if you work hard and do the right thing. You don't have to be an NFL star. You may be the best policeman, nurse or sanitation collector.

**Q: What was the initial reaction in your community to helping Michael, and did that change after the book was published and the movie came out?**

**A:** I don't know that everybody has come around in 2½ years. Everyone has an opinion and the bottom line is that we don't really care what their opinion is. We just do what works for us.

**Q: Were you a consultant on the script or the movie set?**

**A:** No. But they (production crew) spent about two years with us. We felt that John Lee Hancock (writer/director of the film) knew the pulse of our family. We knew we were going to have to make a few Hollywood adjustments, but for the most part, they really stayed true to the message.

**Q: What scene moved you the most?**

**A:** The car wreck was much more horrific in real life than the movie. When I watched it in the screening room for the first time and I saw that scene, I realized how close I came to losing my children, so I sat there and sobbed.

**Q: You maintain that we need to have a little less conversation and a little more action. How do you drive that message home when you speak?**

**A:** Everybody talks a good talk and I am a pro at "actions speak louder than words." It's easy to talk about stuff and I tell my children all the time: "Shut your mouth and do something," because getting up and talking about it doesn't help anybody — just stop talking about what you are going to do and do it.

**Q: You've been quoted as saying: "God gives people money to see how you're going to handle it." Is this the message you like to convey when you're asked about your wealth?**

**A:** My husband and I worked hard for what we have. We've been blessed and we're big believers in sharing. I don't like to be told what to do with my money. We are big believers in the fact that if you've been blessed, then you need to share. We are passionate about that.

## On the Web

For information about "Making it Happen: The Tuohy Family Foundation," visit <http://www.makingithappenfoundation.com>.

## At a glance

For more on the "Celebrating Women" conference, see Page 14.

COURTESY PHOTOS