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## Ronda Templeton: St. Jude's Ranch has a pioneering leader

Early in my journalism career, I attended a luncheon meeting in my publisher's office. A community leader — someone I covered on my daily beat — was the guest. As the meeting came to an end, the publisher turned to me, the only woman in the room, and asked me to clear the plates from the table.

What the publisher no doubt saw as a harmless request, I viewed as an outrageous example of workplace inequality.

I thought about that moment when the San Antonio Express-News asked me to write a weekly column about women and business. The women you'll meet show just how far we've come and, in some cases, how far we have to go.

The good news is that none are clearing plates; they all have seats at the table.

First up: Christine J. Spadafore, an attorney who received her degree from Harvard Law and earned a reputation for corporate restructuring — a tough, often-cutthroat milieu populated by masters of the slash-and-burn such as Carl Icahn and T. Boone Pickens.

Spadafore is cut from a different cloth. Her specialty is the "compassionate turnaround." Nowhere is that more evident than in the miracle she has performed at St. Jude's Ranch for Children, a nonprofit haven for abused and neglected youngsters with campuses in Bulverde, New Braunfels and Boulder City, Nev.

In mid-2006, St. Jude's Ranch — named for the patron saint of lost causes — was on the brink of disaster, with just two months' cash on hand. Enter Spadafore, the first non-priest and woman to head the organization in its 40-year history.

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Under Spadafore's direction, St. Jude's Ranch has undergone a transformation. The organization is financially stable, has a revised mission statement and core values and, most significantly, is operating under a three-year plan with strategic goals that are monitored and measured weekly.

Spadafore, whose initial role was limited to consulting, is now a permanent fixture. The board asked her to take the position of chief executive officer and she agreed, despite significant cuts in pay and corporate stature. She has applied what she learned in business to the nonprofit sector: Arm yourself with a strategy, develop a sustainable plan, surround yourself with an excellent staff and reward them for outstanding performance.

Why, one might wonder, would Spadafore, whose previous positions sent her to far-off, glamorous locations such as London and Provence, France, give up money, prestige and power to devote her life to small-town homes for abused children?

Spadafore answered that question when Billy, an 8-year-old St. Jude's Ranch resident, innocently asked: "What do you do here, anyway? You don't cook, drive, clean or cut the grass."

Spadafore's answer? "My job is to make sure you're safe and happy." And make them safe and happy she does.

As Spadafore — who enjoyed a "dream" childhood with parents who supported her every ambition — explains, "These children have never had a chance to be kids. They arrive hungry, behind in school, without a change of clothes. I want to give them everything I had as a child, and I had plenty."

Here's just one example: In late summer, Spadafore realized she had a problem. Although St. Jude's Ranch is now financially stable, money is always in short supply. One month before classes started, the children were missing a rite of passage — new shoes for a new school year.

Spadafore called in a favor, telephoning one of the flush corporations where she had worked in her past life. Three days later, four huge boxes packed full of shoes in all sizes were delivered.

Spadafore's next order of business? Haircuts.

Yes, haircuts.

"Do you know a good cutter?" she asked. "I can't have my kids going to school looking shaggy."

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*Ronda Templeton is a freelance writer and the founder of Templeton Davidson Communications. She may be reached at [ronda.templeton@gmail.com](mailto:ronda.templeton@gmail.com)*

Christine J. Spadafore Title: Chief executive officer of St. Jude's Ranch for Children

What: Financial turnaround specialist who began her career as an intensive care nurse and later received her law degree from Harvard Law School.

Notable achievement: Used her corporate restructuring expertise to rescue a struggling nonprofit ranch for abused, abandoned and neglected children. Today, St. Jude's Ranch is a thriving organization that cares for more than 120 infants and children in Texas and Nevada.

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