

SUCCESS SECRET:  
"Life is too short not to  
do what you love."  
Kathy Lewis, CEO,  
Christopher Reeve  
Foundation

Photo: Kathy Lewis (L) with Dana Reeve



## Kathy Lewis Leads the Christopher Reeve Foundation

By Leigh Henderson

Three years ago this fall, Kathy Lewis, CEO, Christopher Reeve Foundation, found herself out of a job for the first time in her life. When her husband asked what she really wanted to do, Lewis didn't hesitate. "My fantasy is to run Christopher Reeve's organization."

She got her wish in May 2004, when she became president and CEO of the Christopher Reeve Foundation (CRF), an \$18 million organization dedicated to curing spinal cord injury by funding innovative research and improving the quality of life for paralyzed people through grants, information and advocacy.

With National Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Month this month, Lewis spoke with PINK about the foundation, Chris and Dana Reeve, and successful fundraising techniques.

**PINK: What's the most remarkable thing to happen in your career?**

**KL:** Wishing for this, my fantasy job, and getting it a few months later.

**PINK: How did you meet Chris?**

**KL:** In 1995, I was working at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation as vice president of marketing and public relations. When Chris was admitted, I was assigned to his case. During his year there, I managed the media and we would do press conferences together. I also became friendly with his family. After he left, we kept in touch. When the headhunter called in early 2004 about the job at Chris's foundation, it seemed a natural fit.

**PINK: What was your biggest challenge?**

**KL:** My challenge was how to balance Chris's role as chairman of the board and mine as president and CEO. During the interview, I asked, "How do we handle that?" He said, "Beat me up mercilessly if I disagree with a good business decision."

**PINK: What do you remember about working with Chris and Dana?**

KL: One day in the summer of 2004, I looked at Chris and didn't like what I saw. So I truthfully replied, "You're not looking well. Are you feeling OK?" He joked, "Who made you my doctor?" "Dana," I answered. Dana was amazingly wonderful during appearances. If there were people in wheelchairs she would kneel down and look people in their eyes. Families understood that she knew what it was like.

**PINK: How did you adjust after the deaths of Chris in October 2004 and then Dana in May 2006?**

KL: I have a huge responsibility to carry on the revolution in healthcare that Chris started. My two worst days were when Chris died and then Dana. I was the one to call the board and all the staff. The next day I was being interviewed and making TV and radio appearances while dealing with a great personal loss. Yet it was and still is an honor to memorialize them.

**PINK: Two new Reeves recently became members of the CRF's board of directors – Alexandra Reeve and Matthew Reeve.**

KL: I've known the children since they were kids; they are wise, caring and loving. It's very important to them that they stay connected to both their father and stepmother.

**PINK: September is National Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Month. What do we need to know?**

KL: Buckle your seat belt, don't drink and drive, look before you dive into a pool. Dana set up an International Resource Center for people to call or e-mail us when they need answers, such as what to do to if your child breaks her neck. Go to ([paralysis.org](http://paralysis.org)) – or (800.225.0292). This is a free service. A parent called because her son in a wheelchair wanted to go on a safari. We know of travel agents who can arrange that.

**PINK: The U.S. House and Senate passed the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act by wide margins, yet President Bush vetoed it in July. How has the CRF responded?**

KL: CRF is extremely disappointed with the veto. The president shattered the hopes of millions of Americans living with paralysis and many other diseases and disabilities who dream of a cure in their lifetime. We don't know where the cure is coming from. If there are 10 possibilities, we want the freedom to go down each path to explore these to find the cure.

**PINK: What's your strategy for sustaining and increasing contributions?**

KL: We need to raise about \$20 million per year. Our funds come from large foundations, corporations, individuals who make major gifts, and individuals who give \$10 per year – our largest group of contributors. I suggest having a good communications strategy in place. You need to clearly make your case, communicate with people regularly and make the pitch personal. At a recent fundraiser in New York, I introduced a young girl who'd broken her neck but after rehabilitation can now walk on crutches. This story demonstrated how a spinal cord injury can be treated.

**PINK: What is the secret of your professional success?**

KL: I am always balancing my time among work, my husband, my 9-year-old daughter and my 12-year-old son. But it's not just about taking time. It's about consciously not doing things

halfway. For instance, I ask myself, "Is it going to make a difference if I leave work one hour early to see my daughter's third grade play?" If I ask that question, I get a clear answer. I encourage my staff to ask the same type of balance questions.

**PINK: What words of advice have you found helpful in your own career?**

LK: Be passionate. Love what you do. If you're dreading going to work in the morning, you're probably doing the wrong thing. Figure out what you love and do it!