

Women Who Say Yes to the Spark

A Story Series by Angie Thompson

Published July 2026 | AngieThompsonConsulting.com

Leading With a Mother's Heart

Penny Meadows never expected that a conversation early in her career would stay with her for decades.

A young person she was working with was having a difficult time, and no one seemed quite sure how to reach her. That morning, Penny walked into a situation where the teenager had withdrawn from those around her and was keeping to herself.

Penny didn't stop to create a plan or rehearse a response. She simply did what a mother, teacher, or trusted adult might do on instinct. She sat down beside her, leaving enough space to avoid crowding her but staying close enough to let her know she wasn't alone.

“What is going on? How can I help you?”

In the moments that followed, Penny asked a question that would shape much of her life and leadership.

“What is going on? How can I help you?”

The young person kept her head down and answered with little more than a shrug and a few words. Whatever hurt she was carrying remained difficult to reach, but something important happened in that moment. She did not walk away.

She stayed.

And sometimes, staying is enough.

Years later, Penny would look back on that conversation and recognize a pattern that had followed her throughout her life. Again and again, she found herself sitting beside people who were hurting, listening long enough for trust to grow, and helping them discover a way forward.

The roots of that instinct reached back to a small farm near Aberdeen, South Dakota. Faith, family, and hard work shaped the rhythms of daily life. Her grandparents helped plant the local church that anchored their community. Kindness wasn't something people talked about. It was



Penny Meadows

simply part of how they lived.

As Penny entered middle school, life became more complicated. Some of her classmates were making choices she didn't want to be part of, and rather than risk heading down the same path, she began keeping to herself. What started as caution slowly became isolation. By high school, her grades were slipping, and so was her confidence.

During her sophomore year, a counselor called her into his office.

“I don't know what's happening,

but you need to turn this around. God has more for you.” His words took her by surprise, but they also reached her. It was the first time someone outside her immediate family looked beyond the person she appeared to be in that moment and spoke to the person she could become.

It was a small moment, spoken in a small room, but it stretched far into her future.

Another defining moment came during her senior year at Bartlesville Wesleyan College. During her final semester, she moved home to complete her coursework and spent time with her grandfather, who was living with her parents near the end of his life.

One morning they were talking before class. When Penny stepped away to finish getting ready, she heard a sound and rushed back into the room. Her grandfather had passed away.

What she remembers most is not fear, but peace.

“I felt God’s presence in a way I cannot forget,” she said. “It was as if He whispered, as close as you feel Me now, I will always be this close.”

The experience deepened a faith that would guide her through every season.

While still in college, Penny volunteered with Big Brothers Big Sisters. Her “little brother” was a boy without much

structure at home, a child drifting. She didn’t try to fix him. Instead, she spent time with him, listened, and gradually earned his trust. The experience showed her how simply being present with someone can open the door to change.

That lesson followed her into every role that came afterward.

She worked on adolescent psychiatric units in Tulsa, taught character development in inner-city schools, and served in youth-focused organizations where young people often carried burdens far beyond their years. Many people were overwhelmed by the challenges. Penny became known for paying attention, seeing beyond behavior, and helping people find a way forward.

Across every role, a similar pattern emerged. Young people opened up to her. Colleagues trusted her. Leaders recognized her ability to bring calm and stability into difficult situations.

Her influence rarely came from authority. It came from relationships, trust, and a genuine concern for the people around her.

As her responsibilities grew, Penny came to understand that leadership is about more than programs and outcomes. It is also about the people those decisions affect. Over the

years, she developed a simple practice: pause, pray, listen, and respond.

Today, former students, youth, and employees still stop to tell her how much those conversations mattered. Not because she had all the answers, but because she took the time to truly see them and remind them they mattered.

The encouragement she received as a teenager became the encouragement she spent a lifetime offering to others.

Perhaps that is Penny Meadows’ greatest legacy. Not the positions she has held or the programs she has led, but the people who walk away believing there is more ahead for them than they can currently see.

Just as someone once believed it for her.



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About Penny Meadows

Penny Meadows has devoted her career to helping young people. A graduate of Bartlesville Wesleyan College, she is the Executive Director of HeartMatters, a Bartlesville-based nonprofit that provides character development and digital media safety education for children, youth, and families. Throughout her career in youth-serving organizations, she has encouraged young people to recognize their strengths, navigate challenges, and believe in the possibilities ahead. She is known for her ability to listen well, build trust, and create spaces where honesty, growth, and encouragement can flourish.

To learn more about HeartMatters, visit www.heartmatters-ok.org.

About the Writer and Permissions

Angie Thompson is a fundraising strategist, consultant and storyteller who helps nonprofits, organizations, and purpose-driven individuals shape messages that inspire action. My work brings together message development, creative strategy, and community-rooted storytelling, informed by award-winning experience in film, television, and philanthropy.

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This story is based on a personal interview and reflections shared by Penny Meadows and is published with permission. It is part of the *Women Who Say Yes to the Spark* series, created to celebrate leadership, creativity, and meaningful work.

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