



Seeds of Change

By teaching girls how to grow vegetables in their backyards, Melany Grout is transforming their futures.

▶▶ **EVERY FEW MONTHS**, Melany Grout spends more than a day flying from Seattle to Dubai to Delhi to Kolkata, India. Once there, she rides a train for 14 hours, then sits in a car for a few more, until she reaches the rice paddies, dirt roads, and tiny thatched homes of rural West Bengal. “When I’m there, I might literally be as far away from home as possible,” says Grout, 33, an attorney with the Seattle-based nonprofit Landesa.

new hope for their futures simply by harvesting a kilo of chili peppers or a few bushels of spinach. “We have a girl who earned her own cash for the first time,” Grout says. “It’s a small amount, only the price of a coffee drink here, but it was enough to make her want to stay in school.” To raise awareness of a woman’s right to land ownership and education, local staff hold “community conversations.” “Changing how people think can be slippery,” Grout says. “But I’ve seen parents go from claiming ‘My daughter is worthless’ to pledging to keep her in school!”

In West Bengal, poverty runs rampant, and daughters typically get less respect—and food—than sons. “Girls are seen as burdens, not as contributors to the family,” Grout says, “so fathers often pull them out of school and marry them off young to avoid having to give a dowry.”

With Landesa’s help, the Indian government will expand Girls Project to reach roughly 35,000 girls this summer. By next year, Grout hopes, that number will grow to millions.

Grout hopes to boost these daughters’ social status with her program Girls Project, which teaches a simple but powerful skill: how to grow food, often on an unused backyard patch of land. “If girls can contribute vegetables to the dinner table or actually sell them for income,” Grout says, “their families recognize their value.”

“It’s crazy how small the world can feel,” she says. “I meet girls who want exactly the same things I do: an education; the chance to decide who they become; to gain control over their lives—and they’re doing it.” —SARAH ENGLER

Since 2011 the program has helped more than 7,000 girls ages 11 to 18 find

GET INVOLVED! Empower girls locally: *Girls Inc. teaches self-defense, community leadership, and more. See how you can help at girlsinc.org.*

Clockwise from above: Grout, in Seattle; sisters show off their harvest; a peer leader instructs West Bengal girls on land rights.



5 THINGS I KNOW FOR SURE

KID PRESIDENT

Robby Novak, the 9-year-old with one powerful “pep talk” (23.9 million YouTube views and counting), would like you to live a little and dance a lot.

1

HUG MORE, SHOUT LESS. That’s all.

2

DANCE ALREADY. Get up and move! I have brittle bone disease, which basically means my bones are really fragile—I’ve had more than 70 breaks since I was born. But I always find a reason to dance. My favorite move: the pencil sharpener.

4

MOM UPSIDE DOWN IS WOW. I wish every mom in the world knew how amazing she was. Sometimes it’s just hard for us kids to say how much we love them. (But moms, let’s cool it on the meatloaf.)

3

IF LIFE IS A GAME, AREN’T WE ALL ON THE SAME TEAM? Then let’s start acting like it. We need to work together—and stop being bullies.

5

BE MORE AWESOME. Just because you’re a grown-up doesn’t mean you have to be all grown up. Be cool. Everybody can be boring, but you’re cooler than that. Every day when you wake up, you have the chance to be a party. What will you create to make the world better? Nothing, if you keep sitting there! —AS TOLD TO ABBE WRIGHT



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DEBORAH ESPINOSA/LANDESA, BRAD MONTAGUE, LANDESA (2).