Not Lost in Translation

Olenka Polak and her older brother, Adam, often witnessed dialog get lost in translation when their Polish immigrant parents tried to take in American movies. Then, in 2012 the siblings took cousins visiting from Poland to see Martin Scorsese’s Hugo. “That was the aha moment,” says Olenka, a 2011 Greenwich High grad and former Greenwich magazine Teen to Watch. “They didn’t like it and were so confused. And we thought, wouldn’t it be cool if no matter where you are, you could enjoy a movie in a language that’s familiar.”

Two years later, twenty-year-old Olenka dropped out of Harvard to focus her creative intellect on myLingo, a revolutionary smartphone app that allows viewers to plug into prerecorded movie voice tracks in thirty-two languages. For a modest per-movie fee, myLingo users can discreetly access proprietary technology developed by the Polaks, and listen in sync with what’s on-screen.

Olenka predicts myLingo, which received the Harvard Innovation Prize and $750,000 from Greenwich financiers, could revolutionize cinema experiences for more than 300 million people she describes as “language displaced.”

When Olenka told her parents she was abandoning Harvard three semesters shy of graduation, “My mother was like, ‘Are you serious?’ but I told her priorities change,” says Olenka, who doesn’t mind comparisons to fellow Harvard dropouts Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. “I think it’s exciting that technology homegrown and financed in Greenwich—and born out of a childhood complicated by language barriers—could be the next big thing.”

—Beth Cooney Fitzpatrick

MOMS CARE

Like most moms, Stephanie Norton and Kim Athan appreciate Mother’s Day gifts. Yet when they learned $18 billion is spent annually on the day, they considered the good that could happen if just a tiny percentage of that went to mothers with more desperate needs. So the Old Greenwich residents helped found the MOTHERS’ DAY MOVEMENT. In four years MDM has successfully supported projects that provide mothers globally with life-changing essentials like clean water, educations and health care.

MDM is not a charity, instead it encourages giving to carefully selected nonprofits through its website mothersdaymovement.org, focusing on something new and worthy each year. “We look for small, impactful projects that might not get attention otherwise,” explains Kim.

The seeds for MDM were planted after its founders read Half the Sky, journalists’ Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s provocatively disturbing look at the ongoing oppression of women worldwide. After Kristof gave them a shout-out in his New York Times column, the movement raised $125,000 in its first year to help support a girls’ school and clinic in Kenya.

This year, MDM is supporting the CleanWater Initiative, which brings potable water to northern Uganda. There’s a personal connection here: The charity was founded by the son of a friend of Kim’s parents; a serviceman killed in Afghanistan. “Typically, the burden falls on girls to walk miles to bring clean water to their villages; and in their world, it’s dangerous,” says Stephanie. “We take clean water for granted.” Water may be the best Mother’s Day gift ever.

—Beth Cooney Fitzpatrick