Classroom Speaker Stories

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What does it mean to be poor? Only someone who has experienced both the pain of poverty and the perks of privilege can truly answer that. Someone like Aitran Tang Doan.

Aitran has lived the kind of life most American students could never imagine, navigating two very different world—the first world and the third world.

For generations, war changed her family’s fortunes and forced them to run for their lives. Her grandfather fled China in the 1930s during the Japanese invasion and built a comfortable fortune in Vietnam, managing a brick factory. But he was powerless again as the Vietnam War escalated, destroying his business and the promising futures of his eleven children. Everything he had worked so hard to achieve was confiscated by the government.

Her aunts and uncles also left behind affluent lives in Saigon, emigrating to the United States where they had to take odd jobs to survive.

Aitran herself started life in a Vietnamese farming village before her family joined the immigrant wave looking for safety and opportunity in America. They settled in Brooklyn, New York where they had little money—her mother’s job paid just $8,000 a year-- but there was the promise of opportunity.

“I was certainly poor in Vietnam and Brooklyn. However, although my circumstances...were not ideal, I was able to seek other opportunities to change the cards that were dealt to me.”

Aitran knew that education was the key to opening great opportunities for her future. So she worked hard and earned a seat at some of the top schools in America. She won a full scholarship to an elite New England Prep School and then went on to Stanford University in California. She had moved into a world of intellectual and economic riches but, inside, she was struggling with her self-image.

“I was scared to share who I was because nothing fit together. I was scared my first-world friends would pity my third world past. I was scared that everyone would think that I was a fake, because I am no longer the Vietnamese
girl working in the rice paddies. I am also no longer the inner-city immigrant child fighting off poverty. It has taken me a long time to process all these feelings and all these emotions. I don’t think I felt very reconciled with the guilt of privilege that I had.”

During high school Aitran found the encouragement and the courage to open up to others about her personal journey, turning her self-doubts into positive action.

“Telling my story did not cause others to pity me. Telling my story empowered me, and it empowered others to continue their own struggles, or to continue the work they were doing to provide resources for others to take control of their lives.”

Today, she is committed to working on behalf of other vulnerable people, especially immigrants and refugees. She has already worked in Ecuador and with indigenous groups in the Amazon. Most recently, she produced a documentary about a Syrian family she befriended at a refugee camp in Greece. They dreamed of reaching Germany but each day brought new obstacles.

“I was starting to understand a little bit the type of ambiguity that lingers over my friends lives that I have not been able to truly experience as a volunteer.”

Witnessing their strength in adversity has given her own “can do” spirit a boost.

“I am prepared to meet...new challenges that will keep coming at me. Interacting with these sojourners, these refugees and economic migrants...really helped to bring that mentality out for me.”

“I am determined to contribute to a future where everyone can tap into their potential, where the billions of people who are poor, not merely for material reasons but also because they have no means to seek out opportunities, can do so.”

Aitran Tang Doan, an immigrant from Vietnam, has lived the kind of life most American students could never imagine, navigating two very different worlds - the first world and the third world. Based on her experience, Aitran is now committed to working on behalf of vulnerable people, especially immigrants and refugees. She is studying International Relations at Stanford University in California.

Aitran with her Ecuadorian host family in 2014
Aitran is making an impact in Vietnam, Syria, Ecuador, Greece & the U.S.
Alexis Werner says she wakes up every morning wanting to be Wonder Woman, not like the star of the blockbuster Hollywood movie, but by using her own real powers to change the world.

“We all have superpowers and can use them to help others and learn about ourselves. The world has the ability to be a loving, kind, and fair place- we just have to be the change makers on the ground changing it.”

That sense of confidence did not come easy to Alexis who was born to teenage parents. After they split up, her mother joined the military, and her father was off working to make ends meet, so a wide assortment of family, neighbors, and friends helped her parents supply the love and encouragement she needed.

“I had a bedroom at every house in Pittsburgh. As a young person I was told I could be whoever I wanted to be. Coming from a low-income family with an unstable household would not limit my possibilities.”

When Alexis was a teenager, her mother met and married a soldier who had returned from the war suffering from severe Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). It turned Alexis’s world upside down. Like so many young people, Alexis needed someone she could turn to as she struggled to cope with the difficult new realities at home. Luckily, she found an incredible mentor named Gregg.

“Gregg told me I could continue to be mad and turn to drugs and alcohol when things got bad, or I could change my narrative and become powerful and an agent of change for people in my situation. This was the beginning of my journey.”

Within three months of her conversation with Gregg, Alexis, who was still in high school, created a non-profit organization called Seeds of Hope.

“I needed something positive in my life that was crumbling in shambles around me. I felt that if I didn’t help to change the world, who would? Social change became my coping and my passion. It was my escape from things happening at my house. It became my identity.”
Her Seeds of Hope team created 15 national victory gardens at community organizations, VFW locations, and Fisher House Foundation houses nationwide. This resulted in the production of over 3,000 pounds of vegetables and herbs for veterans and their families. In 2012, with the help of two of her peers she produced a children’s book called “Beginning Hope” which teaches elementary school students the importance of nutrition, volunteering, and appreciation of veterans.

She has also produced a documentary about Post Traumatic Stress called “Our Way Home” which premiered in late 2015. Currently, Alexis is Development Coordinator with Bunker Labs in Philadelphia, a non-profit dedicated to helping new veteran entrepreneurs start their own businesses.

“I don’t see limitations on anyone when it comes to creating change because we all have so much to give. If we all do our part, it makes a significant change.”

Alexis Werner is a 2018 graduate of Temple University and was the teen founder of the Pittsburgh-based non-profit Seeds of Hope to help veterans cope with PTSD. Currently, Alexis is Development Coordinator with Bunker Labs in Philadelphia, a non-profit dedicated to helping new veteran entrepreneurs start their own businesses.

*Alexis Werner at Citi Group HQ in New York City to screen her film ‘Our Way Home’*  

*Alexis is making an impact in Pennsylvania, USA*
Amanda Kraus remembers the walk she used to take each day to the Little Red Schoolhouse in the Big Apple. Her daily route took her by Washington Square Park and a scene that made a lasting impression on a little girl.

“I was struck by the how many homeless people lived in Washington Square Park. How could so much poverty exist when we had a roof over our heads and a good school to attend and food to eat?”

Her sense that all was not right in the world was nurtured in class where the focus, she says, went beyond reading, writing, and math.

“The school was really invested in helping us become good human beings who thought about the world and other people’s needs.”

Later, in high school in the Hamptons, she could not help but notice again the disparity between the wealthy and the poor in her neighborhood.

“This never sat well with me.”

The images of inequality that Amanda had observed growing up and coming of age, finally came into focus during graduate school in Boston, when she volunteered to coach rowing to girls from under-resourced communities.

“Many of the girls I worked with just needed someone in their lives to spend time with them, to push them to do things they did not think they were capable of; someone who believed in them, helped them with homework, and remembered their names and the details of their lives.”

It was an experience that set Amanda’s course for the future.

“It started with an idea and figuring out how to make it come true.”

Amanda decided she would use rowing and the values it instills - tenacity, focus, teamwork and confidence -
to give others what it takes to succeed in life. So, in 2002, with one borrowed boat and eight teenage would-be rowers, she founded *Row New York*, pairing competitive rowing with rigorous academic support.

“There was not a day that went by during that first year that I did not think I was making a mistake or that I would fail.”

But her years of college rowing prepared her to keep pushing forward and, today, Row New York’s core, year-round program prepares middle school and high school at-risk girls and boys for success both on and off the water.

Five days a week, the students train with experienced athletic coaches who teach them to swim and row; three days a week they work with expert academic tutors who provide support with homework, math, reading, writing, as well as Regents and SAT preparation. Row New York tracks students’ progress and makes sure that each student meets college reading standards.

“It is great to have a really strong kid breaking records on the rowing machine or loving rowing, but if she or he is not doing well in school, than we are really not doing enough in my opinion.”

100% of Row New York graduates go on to higher learning, most on scholarship. And virtually all student-athletes report an improved lifestyle and newfound pride and purpose.

From one boat and a simple idea, Row New York has grown to serve 230 middle and high school students in its year-round intensive program, and more than 2,200 participants across all programs, including PE classes in NYC public middle schools, summer camps, para-rowing for athletes with physical and/or cognitive disabilities, and programs for adults.

It has been a rewarding ride for Amanda who believes that rowing is a game changer for disadvantaged teenagers, giving them a powerful foundation on which to build future successes.

“I do not think the access to the sport should be limited to kids who come from families who can afford to send them to schools with rowing. I believe in Row New York’s ability to help these kids become the people they want to become.”

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*Founder and Executive Director of Row NY, Amanda Kraus is transforming the lives of low-income New Yorkers through the discipline of rowing and rigorous academic support. She received the 2014 Non-Profit Excellence Award presented by the Non-Profit Coordinating Committee of NYC. She is also Adjunct Assistant Professor at the NYU Graduate School of Public Service.*

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*Brooklyn high school students rowing on Paerdegat Basin in Canarsie*  
*Amanda is making an impact in New York, USA*
Never say no to Apefa Adjivan because for this college student, no always means yes.

She heard it from her high school counselors when she wanted to go to the University of Toronto. No—girls like her would never get in.

She heard it from other teenage girls like herself who were told to give up on their goals. No—you can't do that because of who you are.

She heard it first from her Aunt when 5-year-old Apefa told her that she wanted to be a doctor. No—girls who looked like her, from her background, don't become doctors.

"As a young black woman, I have been told countless times that I cannot accomplish my goals," says Apefa. "However, this moment was one of the most impactful in that respect, and I believe one of the earliest memories I have of being told that my race meant that my future was limited."

Apefa Adjivon was born in a refugee camp in Ghana, Africa. When she was 4, her family moved to Canada into a low-income community where everyone struggled just to get by.

"My parents could not continue to pursue their prior careers in Canada, and for some time, we lived in public housing and my parents both took on numerous odd jobs to make ends meet."

Eventually, through her parents’ hard work and determination, the family was able to afford a more comfortable, middle class lifestyle. And although Aperfa’s childhood was happy, her family clung to its Ghanian ways, which meant that girls do not go to school. In that environment, Aperfa became aware of issues facing girls, not just in developing countries, but in the West as well.

It all came to a head during her first year in college when Aperfa had a conversation with a group of high school students. They were angry because their teacher had discouraged them from applying to their first choice university.
“Their skills and potential were negatively being assumed because they were black women,” says Aperfa. “Meeting them made me think of myself and my upbringing. The knowledge that young women today are going through the same things I went through, and still being told the same negative, limiting rhetoric, angered me.” But Aperfa didn’t just get angry, she got motivated.

“That frustration turned into my speaking more boldly and openly about women’s rights issues, particularly the struggles of young black women. The more I talked about it, the more I got engaged in efforts to support youth and girls of color, and unexpectedly and unintentionally got very engaged in social change.”

Through a fellowship with the Resolution Project that recognizes and helps support socially responsible young leaders, Aperfa was able to put her vision into action. She founded The Pearl Project, an after-school program for girls from a low-income Toronto community.

“Understanding that my experiences are not unique to me but, in fact, are a common barrier other young people and young racialized women face is the baseline for my work,” says Aperfa.

Using space provided by the local government, The Pearl Project pairs girls with mentors and career counselors, based on similarities in cultural and racial identity, as well as interests, with the mission of inspiring and empowering the girls to reach their own goals.

“Do not let the fact that you are young or inexperienced stop you from pursuing your passions,” says Aperfa. “Everyone who has ever done anything has been a beginner at some point. You cannot be an expert or be a leader, or be whatever you want to be without starting first!”

But Aperfa admits that changing minds is not going to happen overnight. Despite the many accomplishments she has had in advocating for the right of girls to ignore the naysayers in their lives, she says she is still regularly discouraged from pursuing her work and her own future goals. “Implicit racism, sexism, and ageism continue to be the biggest barriers I face as I work to advocate against them.”

Aperfa says she is adamant that age, gender, race or any other factor should not stand in the way of young people who are ready to invest their talent and energy in pursuit of new ideas and lofty goals.

“The more I work in this field and speak to other young people about their dreams and visions for the world and for their communities, the more I believe that I can, and that young people as a whole can make a change!

A per fa i s c urrently s t ud y ing I n t ernational Relations and Women's Studies at the University of Toronto. She has been named one of Canada's top 30 under 30 in Sustainability, North America's Top 22 Under 22 Most Inspiring Collegiate Women, A Young Leader Building Peace by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, one of the Top 150 Canadians by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, a young woman in leadership by the City of Toronto, and most recently a Forbes Fellow for her inspiring leadership and actions within her field.
In China today, most children under 2-and-a-half, as well as 40 percent of children over age 3 are cared for by their grandparents.

Bonnie Chiu’s childhood in Hong Kong was no exception. While her parents pursued their careers to support the family, Bonnie’s grandmother provided the love and care she needed, along with a perspective on the world based on her unsettling past.

“She was born into difficult circumstances - having to flee Indonesia as a refugee, having to give up education to take care of her siblings,” says Bonnie. “Yet despite all the difficulties, she is resilient and always hopeful for the future.”

Her grandmother’s example and her guidance had a deep impact on little Bonnie. “From a young age, she cultivated in me a sense of social responsibility, to give back to those who are less fortunate than me.”

As an only child, Bonnie grew up interacting mainly with adults and listening to stories about how her family worked hard to escape poverty. So even though she was raised in a comfortable environment, the message she was given was not to take her privilege for granted. “Getting involved in social change was very natural. I started volunteering during middle school - whenever I had time off from school I would volunteer.”

At 16, Bonnie joined the Junior Achievement company program and became the CEO of a student company. “I was exposed to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, and how doing good can be a core part of any business and of our lives. This exposure evolved into my passion for social enterprises, businesses that make money while doing good.”

In college, another piece of Bonnie’s future fell into place when she started reading about the history of women in China. It was then that she realized how women were oppressed and how hard her grandmother and her mother had to fight for their education and rights. Women’s empowerment, helping women to reach their full potentials, quickly became her passion.

“Two thirds of the world’s illiterate populations are women,” says Bonnie, “and they spend two to ten times as much as men on care responsibilities, just to name a few challenges. As a woman who has been relatively lucky
lucky in that gender has not held me back too much, I feel it is my responsibility to help the others.”

In 2013, fittingly on International Women’s Day, Bonnie founded Lensational, a youth and volunteer led movement, designed to empower marginalized women and girls-- from domestic helpers in Hong Kong to sex workers in Pakistan--through training in photography and digital skills. “Our vision is to create a world where women from all over the world can express themselves freely, fulfill their aspirations and be represented in a dignified way.”

According to Bonnie, more than half a billion women around the globe cannot read or write. Photography, she believes, is a universal language that transcends cultural, geographical and language barriers allowing these really important voices to finally be heard and influence global betterment. “I didn’t anticipate how the idea would gain so much resonance with people across the world. I hope this will inspire people to get out and use the power of photography to tell a story - no matter how small it may seem in the beginning, you never know the impact it may have.”

Lensational’s students receive 50% of the revenue from their photographs that are sold through Lensational’s online platform and partner agencies. Equipped with photography skills, the women can pursue freelance work as well. “Because we work with the world’s most marginalized women, one assumption is that their lives are full of despair and sadness. But it’s not true. Their lives are rich with colors and diverse with experiences.”

Since its founding, Lensational has served 800 women and girls from 23 countries in Asia and Africa thanks to a volunteer army spanning the globe. “When I started out at age 20, a lot of people advised me to get some ‘real world’ experiences before going into social impact, or to find a job before starting my own business. Looking back, I now see that being young is actually an advantage, not a disadvantage!”

Bonnie also hopes to create change by enabling other organizations to deliver more social impact. With that in mind, she started The Social Investment Consultancy, an international consulting firm that specializes in impact evaluation and impact investing. Her experiences have given her wisdom to share with generations coming up. “The late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, you are never too young to lead. This is so true and as young people, you will need to believe in your power!”

Recognized as a champion for global development and gender equality, Bonnie has been invited to speak in 15 countries, featured by major press outlets and is a Forbes Contributor. She is a convener and thought leader in impact investing, serving as the Executive of Diversity Forum in the UK, and the Coordinator of the Women in Social Finance, a network for 100 senior women in impact investing.

She was named a Forbes 30 Under 30 Social Entrepreneur in Europe in 2017, awarded the Hong Kong Youth Service Award, and Young Achiever of the Asian Women of Achievement Awards in 2016. The Entrepreneur.com listed her as one of ‘30 International Entrepreneurs Really Are Solving the World's Problems.’

Bonnie holds an MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics, and a BBA in Global Business Studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.
Brittany Dejean was a mover and a shaker from way back. Her father made sure of that because he loved to move around the dance floor, and he passed on his enthusiasm to his family.

“The reason I love to dance so much is because of my Dad,” Brittany says. “Growing up, he would play bands like Queen, and we’d dance all over the house.”

But that happy family tradition ended tragically and irrevocably when Brittany was just 12 years old. In one shattering moment, her father’s car was broadsided as he drove home with Brittany’s brother beside him.

Her brother was killed instantly; her father was rushed to the hospital in critical condition, where doctors had more devastating news. Brittany’s dad had lost the use of his legs and fingers. He became a quadriplegic, destined to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

“That moment was one of the most difficult things my family went through,” recalls Brittany. “I found out about my brother first, and then I really wanted my Dad to survive. I was just happy to take my Dad in the form I was going to get him in.”

But for her father, the reality was more difficult to accept. His initial reaction was of shock and despair.

“The first time you look at your feet and you can’t move them, you’re going to freak out,” he says.

But as the reality sank in, his thoughts turned to his little girl.

“I used to dance quite a bit. And I do remember thinking, I’ll never dance at her wedding.”

The accident left an invisible imprint on Brittany that would become evident in college. While studying in China, she began exploring the lives of people with disabilities. One man she met there, who had far more body movement than her father, told her he was doomed to spend the rest of his life in bed.
“I saw that people with disabilities faced similar challenges worldwide. That made me realize how lucky we had been to have the resources we had for my Dad.”

Brittany calls it her “moment of obligation.”

“Once I realized that what we had wasn’t the norm, I knew that I needed to do something to make sure everyone has the support and resources to adapt and thrive with a disability. People with disabilities are humans with unique potential, and everyone deserves a chance to thrive.”

In 2014, Brittany founded AbleThrive.

According to The World Bank, one billion people, or 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability. Between 110 million and 190 million people experience significant disabilities. And while there are millions of articles, videos, and resources online about how to live well with a disability, there are barriers to accessing this potentially life-changing information.

AbleThrive works to break down those barriers with a one-stop online platform featuring curated resources for people living with disabilities and their families.

Brittany Dejean is Founder and CEO of the non-profit AbleThrive, committed to fostering inclusion in society for people with disabilities and offering them one-stop, curated resources online. A 2008 Harvard University graduate, Brittany has worked with disability communities in five countries.

#ThriveWorldwide meet up in Manila, Philippines with an organization called Virtualahan

Brittany is making an impact across the U.S.
Brooke Stern was all alone, seven thousand miles from home, camped out in a tent along the Nile River in Uganda and sick as a dog. For weeks, she had been unable to hold down food, finally prompting her worried mother back in New York to say “Brooke, I’m coming to get you.” Brooke didn’t hesitate, “No you’re not, Mom!”

What had brought Brooke to that place? And why was she determined to stay?

You could say it was all her parents’ fault to begin with. Brooke’s mother had dedicated her life to saving medically fragile children. Her father had a passion for cultural awareness and travel in developing countries. The combination had instilled in Brooke, from a young age, a sense of responsibility and a passion for improving the lives of others beyond her own backyard -- which is why a trip to Africa in 2009 became a life changer.

 Shortly after Brooke finished nursing school, she and her father set out on a backpacking trip through East Africa. During the five days they spent in Bujagali Falls in Uganda, they were struck by the extreme poverty and lack of basic necessities, but they were in awe of the enthusiasm and hopeful spirit of the local people.

“In the village we saw hunger but we also saw thirst,” says Brooke, “thirst for knowledge, thirst for a better tomorrow, thirst for the opportunity to lift themselves out of gripping poverty.”

Just one month after that initial visit, Brooke returned to Bujagali Falls with a mission “to help the people harness the two conflicting realities of misery and hope into a powerful combination for success.”

She spent the next 13 months living in the community, talking with the villagers, listening to their needs and wants, and their frustrations. They had received aid from outside organizations, but their lives had not improved in any lasting way. Brooke realized that to break the cycle of poverty, she needed to devise a new model that would address and combat the underlying causes of poverty. She had a plan. It seemed an impossible one but, even as her family told her she was crazy, she was determined. First step -- education.

“I understood that by emphasizing education and self-sufficiency in the community we would have the ability to drastically increase their quality of life.”
Brooke put her heart and soul into her vision, creating the foundation **Supporting Opportunities for Ugandans to Learn** (S.O.U.L.).

What the villagers wanted is what she strives to make happen through a unique community-driven development model. Every S.O.U.L. program is created by Ugandans, for Ugandans, based on Brooke’s research and interactions with community members, who she believes are the true experts on the community’s needs and wants.

“I envisioned developing creative partnerships and business cooperatives, viewing every participant as a stakeholder, thereby lifting themselves up and out of poverty in a sustainable way.”

Eight years later, the model she used in Bujagali has been replicated across 30 other villages in Eastern Uganda, directly and indirectly impacting over 14,000 Ugandans. Its programs focus on education, women’s empowerment, food security, and maternal health. In Uganda, 16 women die each day in childbirth. Many women in rural areas continue to deliver their babies in unsanitary and dangerous environments.

As a new mother herself, Brooke is driven to save these women by educating them about pregnancy and providing them with ultrasound screenings, birthing kits, and prenatal vitamins. One of her dreams is to build a community birthing center where women will have access to life-saving maternal health services.

Today, Brooke divides her year between New York and Uganda where S.O.U.L. Foundation is giving thousands of rural Ugandans opportunities to transform their own lives and, ultimately, the lives of their entire community. What a difference five days can make!

**Brooke is currently the full-time CEO of S.O.U.L. Foundation which fosters sustainable and vibrant Ugandan communities through unique partnerships focused on education, women’s empowerment, food security, and maternal health. Brooke was a TEDx nominated finalist speaker and travels regularly between Uganda and the United States.**
From the age of 14, Carrie had been intent on creating good in the world. On a trip to Jamaica with a non-profit group, Teens for Technology, she had the opportunity to work with local business and teens her own age.

“I was trying to do something to make the world a better place one person at a time,” she recalls. “I saw how combining resources and human capital could have a positive impact on the community and, selfishly, that made me feel good.”

After college, Carrie had the good fortune to work for a most unusual boss. She says he invested in her personally, coaching her, mentoring her, and constructively critiquing her work. Then, to celebrate her 26th birthday, he surprised her with a momentous challenge. He offered to give her the $100 he was going to spend taking her and her colleagues out for a birthday lunch. But she had to accomplish something good with it.

Still very much committed to changing the world, Carrie spent the money reaching out to six organizations she admired, asking them what they would do with a thousand dollars that would have a sustainable impact in their communities. Their replies were eye-opening.

“That small amount of money could improve literacy rates in a Washington D.C. classroom or allow 25 women to graduate from high school in Tanzania.”

Carrie was inspired. If everyone she knew contributed just a little bit of money, it could add up to something big. Galvanized, she sent emails to family and friends asking for small donations. Amid the flurry of $20s and $50s that came in, there was one reply from an address she did not recognize. And this is where her story takes a jaw dropping turn.

The email Carrie received was from the stranger she had met at the business conference. His words took her breath away.

‘I’d like to stay anonymous,’ he wrote, ‘and I’d like to send a million dollars to The Global Good Fund. Where should I send the check?’

Carrie’s first thought was caution, that this was a prank, or worse. But she agreed to meet with him in a public place with surveillance cameras.
Not only did the man show up, he came ready to hand over a cashier’s check for one million dollars!

“He asked, ‘What would you do with the money?’ I hadn’t even thought this through because I honestly didn’t think he would come. But I told him that I would identify high potential young leaders around the world, pair them with targeted capital and seasoned executives who have the experience to help grow their leadership development, which would, in turn, grow their businesses and create positive social impact.”

With that plan, the million dollars was hers. And, just to add another astonishing twist, when Carrie told her boss the story, he said he would match the million dollars himself.

So virtually overnight, The Global Good Fund became a reality with a two-million dollar kickoff!

“I still pinch myself,” says Carrie. “A stranger renewed my faith in what strangers can do for each other.”

Carrie Rich is the Co-founder and CEO of The Global Good Fund, designed to accelerate the development of high potential young leaders and global problem solvers through financial investment and executive mentoring. For her work, Carrie has been recognized as a 2018 Enterprising Women of the Year Awardee and as a Hearts on Fire Visionary.

Accelerating social impact by investing in social innovators

Carrie is making an impact in 32 countries across the globe
Daniel Meyer likes to shake things up with his message to students. You think you are our future leaders? Wrong!

You are leaders NOW!

“Young people are sick of being told that they are future leaders... {those} who are ready to be leaders of the NOW will change the future for the better if only we let them!”

That conviction prompted Daniel to found The Under a Tree Fund to help young people take the leap from thinking to doing, something Daniel admits he did not always do himself.

“I have made far more decisions throughout my life not to be involved in the field of social change than I have made to be actively involved.”

“I felt passionate about enacting social change but also felt angry and alone, unable (or perhaps unwilling) to translate my hope for a better world into an actionable blueprint for achieving that vision.”

Daniel had to go through a period of self-destructive behavior before he could find the strength and the purpose to move forward.

“I needed an outlet--a healthy and sustainable one--for dealing with the world as it is without compromising what it might yet become. My work became the source of that sustenance and purpose.”

The Under a Tree Fund is designed to give students the tools they need to create their own blueprint for action. Students are invited to become Fellows, signing up for a 38-week course of study that helps them identify and develop the skills they need to navigate difficult decisions in a global society.

Through group activities, lively dialogues, community engagement missions, self-reflective journaling, and individual social impact projects, Fellows grapple with questions of identity, justice, ethics, and their own social and civic responsibility.
The success of their projects makes students eligible to compete for scholarships. To date, The Under a Tree Fund has given out $9,000 in scholarships, with an additional $11,000 to be awarded in June 2018.

The bottom line, says Daniel, is “to endow young people with the knowledge, skills, and guidance to translate their own ethics, values, and beliefs into positive, meaningful, and lasting social change.”

Which brings us to another surprising message Daniel likes to share—that his own significance in the world has actually been lessened by his work with The Under a Tree Fund. And that, he thinks, is the way it should be.

“The best teachers, I believe, make ourselves progressively obsolete. The longer we are around, the less we should be needed. The same goes for the work of social impact. The more success our efforts have and the greater the platform for sharing our views, the smaller we should feel. The more we empower others around us to lead autonomously and courageously, the less we should be needed to fuel and sustain that movement.”

Danny is the Founder and CEO of The Under a Tree Fund, a college scholarship fund with a mission of cultivating a new generation of ethical, compassionate and accountable civic leaders and social entrepreneurs through fellowship programs and a social impact curriculum.

Ethical Citizens Fellowship Alumni, John-Paulo Torre, welcomes Under A Tree fellows and parents

Danny is making an impact in the U.S.
Frederick Marx was a little boy when he lost the role model who was supposed to shepherd him into manhood. His father died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving Frederick feeling overwhelmed and confused.

“I couldn’t fathom how death could happen so suddenly and take him away from me forever. On my way to the funeral my uncle said, ‘Well, Freddy, you’re the man of the house now.’ I wanted very much to be that man to my mother, older sister, and younger brother. But I didn’t know how. My uncle didn’t stick around to mentor me and no other men showed up in my life to teach me.”

It was a profound event in Frederick’s life that would start him on a journey to discover the answer to a life-shaping question: how does a boy get to be the man he wants to be?

In high school, Frederick thought basketball would be his entrée to adulthood. But he soon realized he was not good enough to make it a professional career. Years later, he would become a filmmaker and transform his youthful dream of playing basketball into the award-winning documentary Hoop Dreams.

“Making it took me along all the stops of a young man’s journey to the NBA and the success of it took me to the NBA of filmmaking – the Academy Awards.”

In losing his father and, for a time, losing his way, Frederick began to understand the importance of rites of passage and mentorship in a young person’s life.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that if we could reinstitute community-based rites of passage and mentorship… awakening all young people to their own greatness… then we could turn many of the world’s greatest challenges around within a few generations.”

In 2003, Frederick founded Warrior Films to produce compelling documentaries about solutions to the world’s problems. It was a perfect fit, allowing him to combine his filmmaking gifts with his social conscience.
“My life is about two simple things: Art and Service. That’s partly why I got involved in social change. It’s important to me to remain engaged with the realities of the world around me. It’s not only what I make art about, but being of service to others brings me joy and fulfillment.”

Warrior Films specializes in stories of the poor, youth, people of color, and the dispossessed from around the world; everyday people finding ways to overcome oppressive socio-economic barriers. And Frederick says they will begin production soon on a film about the healing process for US combat veterans returning from war.
There is more than a full head of long, wavy hair in Jacob Lief’s DNA. His real crowning glory is a sense of service that Jacob says he inherited from his mother.

“My mother was always helping others. My brother and I had to wake up at four in the morning to do the soup kitchens. We had to read to blind people. It is just how my mother was raised.”

Even when the family moved to London when Jacob was 13, that tradition of service continued. But it was the day Jacob pitched in to distribute “Free Mandela” flyers in Hyde Park that began his connection with his future work in Africa. In 1994, Jacob went to South Africa to observe elections, the first in which all races were allowed to vote. He was astonished to hear from an old woman that she had waited in line for five hours to cast her ballot. Her reply was a game-changer for Jacob.

“She tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘No, boy, I have been waiting for eighty-five years.’ I had never thought about freedom before. Right then I said, I wanted to become part of the new South Africa.” Three years later, he would take the first step.

In 1997, Jacob happened to get off the train in Port Elizabeth, where he met Banks Gwaxula in a shebeen, or local bar. They formed a lasting friendship and together they talked about building a comprehensive education/health program in a South African township. Two years later, they started off and started small, distributing academic supplies to needy children.

Today, their mission reach has dramatically expanded. Jacob is president of the Ubuntu Pathways, providing life-saving medical services and essential educational resources to thousands of orphaned and vulnerable children and their families. In simple terms, Ubuntu strives to give them “what all children deserve—everything.”

It is eco-friendly, 25,000 square-foot headquarters in the Zwide township in Port Elizabeth, enables Ubuntu to provide comprehensive services under one roof, including a pediatric HIV clinic, pharmacy, classrooms, computer labs, theater, and rooftop garden. A child can walk into the building to speak with a counselor or meet
with a doctor. She can snack on fresh vegetables, take a yoga class, study with her English tutor, and leave feeling valued.

It is an indication of Jacob’s deep-seated sense of fairness that Ubuntu’s goal is to provide “his” South African children with the highest quality education and health care, the kind the most privileged parents in America demand—and get—for their own children.

A study by McKinsey & Company found that 96 percent of Ubuntu clients adhere to their HIV treatments, 94 percent are successful with their TB treatments, Ubuntu students excel in school and are well on their way to productive lives, and perhaps the most startling statistic of all— a one-dollar investment in an Ubuntu child results in nearly nine dollars in lifetime earnings for him or her.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says this about the meaning of Ubuntu: “We Africans peak of ubuntu, the recognition of humanity in one another.” This belief in a common human destiny is the heart and soul of Jacob’s passion for justice. Ubuntu is more than a way to do business; it is a way to be.

**Jacob Lief is the Founder and CEO of Ubuntu Pathways (formerly the Ubuntu Education Fund), a nonprofit organization that provides an integrated system of health, education, and social support for vulnerable children in the townships of Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Among his many awards, Jacob was named one of the world’s 101 most innovative visionaries at the Decide Now Act Summit.**

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100% of HIV-positive mothers give birth to HIV-negative babies at Ubuntu Pathways clinic

Jacob is making an impact in South Africa, Africa
I was sitting in a car when I opened the letter with my Peace Corps assignment to Togo. I had no idea where that was in the world. This was pre-smartphone era, so I had to go home and get an atlas to see where I was going to be spending the next 2 years. It was curiosity that motivated me to undertake the adventure originally. I wanted to make a positive impact on the world. I wanted to listen, learn, and experience. I wanted to challenge myself and prove I was up for it. I wanted to have a unique experience to help build my resume. I never expected that this encounter would completely change the trajectory of my career.

I have always believed that the best way to explore the world is by meeting new people. I'm a people person. I get this from my Dad. He's the kind of person who strikes up a conversation with a stranger in line at the store then invites that stranger to our house for dinner! He is never happier than when he is helping a family member or friend. I enjoy being around others and I love making connections. Togo proved to be a beautiful country with amazingly kind and hardworking people.

A fellow Peace Corps Volunteer was working with an incredibly motivated group of about 30 Togolese individuals living with HIV or who had family members living with HIV. At the time, that diagnosis was a death sentence. There was no treatment available to them, but they simply refused to accept the status quo. This group had little funding and even less support, but they got together to take care of each other and fight for their right to health. Treatment was available for others and these courageous individuals were willing to fight for access. I was inspired. While I was not a nurse or a doctor, I wanted to contribute in any way that I could, but at the time wondered if I could make much of a difference. This is how I first got involved with Integrate Health, which transformed my life.

Initially, I didn't know what kind of difference I would actually be able to make. I made small contributions where I could. As I mentioned, not being a doctor or nurse left me insecure about the level of impact I could make, until I met Sadate.

We were training Community Health Workers from my village to promote testing for HIV and provide access to treatment. At the end of the first day of training two participants approached me.
“There’s a boy you must meet,” one of them told me directly.

I followed them to a house where a tiny figure lay on a sack of rice, no bigger than the baby goat he was curled up beside. I was speechless.

This was Sadate. He was 10 years old and weighed only 22 pounds. He had been living in the village with his grandmother since his parents passed away. During that visit the newly trained Community Health Workers convinced Sadate's grandmother to take him to the nearest hospital, 30 miles away. Sadate was hospitalized, tested positive for HIV and was immediately started on antiretroviral therapy.

Sadate was a little boy with a big personality, who I felt privileged to know. I spent afternoons visiting Sadate in the hospital, when he was so ill he could barely speak, but still managed to ask--just as my own kids do whenever I return from Togo--“what did you bring me?”

After one month in the hospital he was released. I remember Sadate coming over to my house in our village. I’d cook up a huge pot of spaghetti and he would eat nearly the entire thing. It was impressive. Within one year his weight doubled. He attended school for the first time. At the age of 11, he ran, for the first time in his life. Meeting and spending time with him was a joy. Sadate’s life exemplifies the importance of having access to healthcare and the happy ending that it can provide. Seeing him get healthy was a treasure and being able to contribute to this transformation helped affirm the impact that I hoped to make.

Today, Sadate is 20 years old and thriving.

The reality of the work that we do is that it is hard. The stakes are extremely high. Not every story has a happy ending. There are times when my confidence gets shaken. Times where I wonder if I can really lead an organization with such an ambitious mandate, trying to improve the healthcare system across an entire country, but then I remember Massan and think of Sadate and Warga and draw strength from their experiences. I have learned much from their indomitable spirits and my life is richer and more joyful for it.

Integrate Health is the new name of the organization Hope Through Health, founded 14 years ago by Jennifer Schechter. Its original focus has broadened to integrate HIV care with maternal, child and reproductive health services in the communities of Togo, West Africa. Jennifer has been building innovative healthcare solutions since 2005, when she opened Hope Through Health’s first rural HIV treatment center while serving as a US Peace Corps Volunteer in Togo.
From the moment he was born, Jimmy Briggs had a lot going for him. A solid family, faith rooted in the Southern Baptist tradition, and powerful women who loved him and expected him to be good, and to be successful.

“My mother, my grandmother and great-grandmother challenged me to carry myself with dignity and love.”

He was also one of the few African-American students in his predominantly white Missouri community. Because of that, he endured a lot of taunting and racial epithets that would influence his work years later.

“It wasn’t an easy time growing up but I found strength in my family and community. A lot of my upbringing was tied to the church. It was not a wealthy church; most members were working class people from the Deep South. They were very proud people.”

And they wanted Jimmie to succeed.

“It was an environment of affirmation. When I would do well in school...I remember members of the church discreetly handing me a five-dollar bill, slipping it to me as a token of their support.”

Their goal, Jimmie says, was to get him to go to college and he didn’t disappoint them. He followed in the footsteps of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and filmmaker Spike Lee, earning a seat at the historically black, all-male Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Studying on a fellowship in Europe his junior year during a time of political upheaval and revolution, Jimmie was an eyewitness to dramatic historic events. He was energized by his immersion in new cultures and languages and writing firsthand accounts of what he experienced. His long held plan to become a doctor went out the window.

“I recognized where my heart was focused--on the lives of the voiceless and people who are not always respected.”

After graduation, he worked at various news outlets, eventually landing at Life Magazine writing stories on children in crisis, gang culture and the impact of urban violence on innocent children.
Over the past two decades, Jimmie Briggs has earned a reputation as a respected human rights advocate in the field of journalism, lecturer, and educator. For his work with Man Up Campaign and the issue of violence against women, Briggs was selected as the winner of the 2010 GQ Magazine "Better Men Better World" Search, as well as one of Women’s eNews’ 21 Leaders for the 21st Century in 2011.

His career also took him to war zones where children were turned into hardened soldiers and where violence against women and girls was brutal and commonplace.

“Boys and girls, eight, nine, and ten years old, were wearing camouflage uniforms and carrying automatic rifles. They were killing other kids, killing adults, and risking their lives for a cause they didn’t understand.

“I internalized some of the worst stories imaginable. It had taken a toll on my soul.”

It also compelled Jimmy to ask himself “What can I do with my life?” The answer that came to him was Man Up Worldwide, the leading cause of death and disability for women between fifteen and forty-four is violence. Jimmie co-founded the Man Up Campaign in 2009 as a global initiative to engage young people around the world stop violence against girls and women.

Man Up uses technology, sports and arts to enlighten and educate young people about the issue of gender violence and empower them to return to their communities and change lives.
Jordan Levy was at college in Wisconsin when he received a letter that would impact everything -- his future, his career plans and his place in the world.

The handwritten letter, postmarked South Africa, was from his dearest childhood friend, Jacob Lief. From the age of three, the two boys had been inseparable, growing up in a leafy, upscale suburb of New Jersey, best friends through grade school and middle school, where their world and their conversation revolved around typical American activities like baseball, play dates and joint family outings. Their two families shared many good times and a common set of values that they tried to instill in Jordan and “Jake.”

“Early on, volunteering was a social activity that brought our two families together -- working in soup kitchens, for instance,” recalls Jordan. “Sometimes, though, it was just directly observing how my parents interacted with the world. “My father is a judge who really believes in fairness and truth so, at home, he used to talk a lot about the justice system as it insures people get treated fairly regardless of social background. My mother worked in a relatively diverse school district close to Newark, New Jersey that faced serious problems. Both my parents had a lot of influence on me. ”

As often happens, family circumstances change and when Jordan was thirteen, Jake and his family moved abroad and the two friends went separate ways. Fast forward years later to college when Jordan was pondering what to do after graduation, assuming his path would lead him to success in the business world. That was when Jake’s letter arrived. Jake was in Port Elizabeth, an area called the Detroit of South Africa. He described a depth of poverty he had never seen in his life, with sewage literally running in the streets. He was living in the home of a school teacher named Banks Gwaxula who had befriended Jake on an earlier visit. Jake said they were working out of a broom closet trying to help the impoverished children in the townships.

“It had a dramatic affect on me,” says Jordan, “and the next time we met, we talked about it extensively.”

The seeds of social justice that had been planted in Jordan as a child by his parents were taking root but they still needed time to bear fruit. After graduation, Jordan and his girlfriend, Jana, headed to Spain to teach English. But when they returned to America, Jake was waiting with a grand plan. He and Banks had started an organization called Ubuntu...a name that means recognizing our common humanity and being there for each other. He described its mission as simple yet radical: to help provide Port Elizabeth township children with what they deserve-- everything. They had started small but they needed to raise money to expand their vision. Inspired by Jake’s mission and encouraged by Jana’s excitement about joining the project, Jordan jumped in as a volunteer.
“I didn’t know much about South Africa, I could barely say the name Ubuntu and I wasn’t getting paid. But I said, great. Let me sleep on your couch and I’ll help you fund raise.”

Jordan recalls this as a “crazy, wild times for 23-year-olds trying to figure out how to run an organization.” He and Jana pitched in on every job that needed doing.

After the first year, he was hooked, not just on the work of the Ubuntu Pathways, but on the non-for-profit sector. But when he told Jake he wanted a job with Ubuntu in South Africa, he got a surprise. Jake said “No, because our model is based on local leadership, done by people from the community.”

Jordan wasn’t deterred. He wanted to learn more about the non-profit sector so he went back to school for a graduate degree. With diploma in hand, he contacted Jake again about working at Ubuntu. Jake accepted both him and Jana as volunteers for six months in South Africa.

As with every startup, they had no clearly defined roles. Jordan says they did everything from cleaning floors to running programs. Their six-month commitment turned into eleven years. During that time, they married, started a family and learned a lot about what it takes to make change in the world.

“It has never been easy,” says Jordan, “which is something I try to translate to young people interested in doing this work. The challenges you face can sometimes be brutal, failures can be difficult; the stakes are very high and the goals ambitious.”

Jordan says building Ubuntu to the point where it is now has taken a decade in which they had to adjust their expectations for change in a country that has been under racist rule for a hundred years and streamline the initial goal to pass off the leadership of Ubuntu to people on the ground. But their learning curve has paid off.

Today, the “broom closet” where the Ubuntu Pathways started in 2001 has grown into a 25,000 square foot headquarters, providing comprehensive services under one roof, including classrooms, a pediatric HIV clinic, a theatre and a rooftop garden. All of the facilities are built for one purpose: to give South African children the same high quality education and health care that American children can access - to be an advocate for them from “cradle through career.” And although Jordan is now living back in New York with his family, he and Jana are still working with Ubuntu.

“It was always a struggle to decide if this was the thing to do with our lives. So many careers will push you in a direction counter to all the things you’ve been taught. But having approximately two thousand kids on a new pathway is amazing. “I was very fortunate that my parents raised me in a particular way with certain values: This is the way we treat other people; this is what’s important in life. It’s not money, it’s relationships.’ I don’t ever want to forget that. It has allowed me to live life based on the things that are most important.”

Jordan Levy is the Chief External Relations Officer at Ubuntu Pathways (formerly Ubuntu Education Fund), a non-profit organization that shepherds orphaned and vulnerable children living in the townships of Port Elizabeth, South Africa from cradle to career, providing them with everything they need to reach their potential.
Martin Solorzano could easily complain about his childhood in a remote mountain village of Mexico. Each day he had to wake at 4 a.m. to milk the cows before heading off to school and then returning home to work the fields, planting corn and seeds.

“I clearly remember the sad days, when it was difficult to get something decent to feed us, or when the rain ruined our little house made of wood, zinc and a dirt floor; when we did not have the resources to get notebooks or pencils or when Christmas arrived and we never received gifts.”

But Martin says, despite being poor, he was happy because he had a rich imagination. And what we imagined was being a doctor. He came to that decision at age 11, when a relative got seriously ill and died because she did not have the money to move to the nearest hospital 3 hours away.

“That day I promised myself that I would be the first doctor in my family and perhaps in the community.”

But that was a challenging road for a country boy in Mexico.

“Being indigenous and poor in Mexico are stigmata that mark you for life and predispose you to live a life full of discrimination and without opportunities; most of the time, we are condemned to repeat the cycle of poverty and marginalization of our parents.”

Martin was determined not to let his circumstances stand in his way. He worked hard on the farm and in school, eventually becoming the first in his family to earn a college degree. And then it was on to the big city, accompanied by his father, to take the exam for medical school.

“The first day I left my town to go to the big city, was one of the worst days I have ever lived; a culture shock I had never imagined.”

Half of their meager money was robbed by a taxi driver who noticed they were country people. They were left stranded with nowhere to sleep and not enough money to get back home. Fortunately, a good Samaritan stepped in and saved the day, giving them food, shelter, and bus fare home. But the best was yet to come.
“One week after, I saw my name in the newspaper saying I was accepted at the Medical School, and my new life was starting in that moment.”

Martin thrived in medical school and, in 2013, he was offered the opportunity to do a clinical year at one of the best hospitals in Mexico. It was a move that transformed his life. During that year, he competed and won a chance to visit the United Nations in New York as a youth delegate representing indigenous people.

“Here I finally found my vocation for social development because it opened my eyes to different ideas and cultures. I decided to take the banner of social development as my own and help my people through [my] experiences.”

Martin worked with both government offices and non-governmental organizations that are responsible for improving the quality of life of indigenous and vulnerable people. In 2015, with the support of the US-based non-profit The Resolutions Project, he created Building Health, a youth organization and program that works to provide free and accessible medical services and health education to indigenous peoples throughout the south of Mexico. In just two years, Building Health has helped nearly 3,000 people directly and 10,000 indirectly.

“I know from experience the hard process they face every day in order to [succeed], and the complicated life to which they are doomed. I firmly believe that the priority of every person who has succeeded is to help the most vulnerable to improve their quality of life in order that they have the same opportunities.”

Along with his work with Building Health, Martin practices medicine at rural centers throughout Mexico. He says his dream is to become a neurosurgeon, “the best neurosurgeon Mexico has ever had, and create a specific program for indigenous peoples where surgeries are accessible to everyone.”

It is the dream of a boy who climbed out of mountains of poverty to change his world. Imagine that.

Martin Solórzano grew up facing extreme poverty in his indigenous community in Mexico. Despite all odds, he was the first in his family and his community to become a doctor. Martin has dedicated his life to alleviating poverty and providing access to healthcare in indigenous communities in Mexico. He is also a fellow of The Resolution Project, founded in 2007 to develop and empower young leaders so they can pursue socially responsible solutions to issues affecting communities around the world.

Martin is making an impact in Mexico
Close your eyes and imagine yourself as the child in this situation: You live in the poorest part of town, surrounded by neighbors struggling to survive. Your father is not present in your life. Your mother tries to hold the family together by mopping floors at the local hospital. But the few dollars she earns are not always enough to put food on the table. So you have to be farmed out to relatives to find a decent meal. And your clothes are often hand me-downs from your mother’s bosses.

What kind of child would you become? What would happen to your dreams? What would it take to turn your tale of woe into a story of success? Like so many children born into families devastated by poverty, you might become a victim, giving up on yourself and your future. You might skip school, hook up with the wrong crowd, experiment with drugs or alcohol, end up in despair or in prison. But there is another scenario; one that starts out as we have described…but takes a different turn into hope, accomplishment, and inspiration.

It is the story of Nozibele Qamngana. Speak with Nozibele Qamngama in South Africa about her life and amazing experiences with Ubuntu Education Fund, now called Ubuntu Pathways. Hear how she defied the odds, and help students understand how they can #BeTheSpark in their communities! Nozi, as she is called, grew up in a black township in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Like most young girls she was into hairstyles, boys and having fun, but she also felt deeply responsible for helping her mother and her brother have a better life. And she believed in her heart that there was only one path out of poverty that was available to her—education.

“I’ve always loved going to school because it became my light at the end of the tunnel. I had to be the best student in the class because I felt the fate of my family was in my hands. And I realized that I could lose myself in learning, growing and even having fun.”

It was at school that Nozi connected with a startup non-profit that would change her life. It was called Ubuntu Education Fund. Nozi says Ubuntu became more than just an organization providing libraries and computer centers in township schools. It gave her educational support and encouragement.

“Ubuntu provided me emotional support, teaching me that I’m beautiful the way I am. And it counseled my mother, enabling her to provide a home of safety and stability.”

And it was at the school library that she first encountered the words of South Africa’s renowned President, Nelson Mandela, affirming her own beliefs about the importance of education.
“It is through education,” he said, “that a daughter of a peasant can become a doctor; that a son of mineworker can become the head of a mine; that a child of a farm worker can become a president of a great nation.”

“These words pushed me to be the best I could be at school and get involved in more activities,” says Nozi. Consequently, in 2003, Nozi took part in a cultural exchange, spending three weeks with families in New York, opening up a whole new perspective on the world and her place in it. With her sights set ever higher, Nozi continued to work hard and became the first in her family to earn a college diploma, graduating at the top of her class with a marketing degree. From there, she entered the world of business, working her way up the corporate ladder from internship to management. After her academic and professional success, it was clear that Nozi’s hard work and positive attitude were paying off. But, in her heart, she felt something was missing, and she knew what it was.

“I was chosen to go to Germany for a one-year executive management training program. It promised to be a great career… but there was unfinished business.”

Nozi was about to take the road less traveled.

“I needed to go back home—to Ubuntu. While some may question why I chose a non-profit organization over a corporation, my answer is simple; I have the opportunity to relive the life of Nozibele Qamngana through the current Ubuntu Scholars.”

Today, Nozi is working in Alumni Relations and Fundraising at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

“As a member of Ubuntu's inaugural class, I am not alone. I am part of a network of successful Ubuntu alumni who are changing the future of our country. And to me that has been enough.”

Nozibele holds a degree in Marketing from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. She is a Nelson Mandela 40 Under 40 Achiever, a 2017 Businesswoman Association of South Africa award winner in the category of Social Entrepreneur of the Year, and a South African Representative at the 2018 World Youth Forum in Egypt. As an exceptional public speaker, Nozi uses her platform to challenge conventional business and non-profit norms, and to debunk stereotypes about the developing world, especially Africa, in Western media.
Growing up in Bangladesh, Nusrat Jabin had to choose between what society thought she should be and her own dreams.

“Being from a middle class family and being a daughter, I grew up within a social pressure that my life is restricted in many sectors just for being a girl.”

Gender discrimination is pervasive in Bangladesh; girls face many obstacles in their development from the time they are born. They are often considered to be financial burdens on their family, and they receive less investment in their care, education, and health.

Bangladesh’s rates of child marriage and adolescent motherhood are among the highest in the world. Most girls are married before they are 18; 33% are married before age 15.

Not Nusrat. With quiet determination and encouraged by her parents, she decided to take the road less traveled and pursue big dreams of going to college, seeing the world and becoming a doctor. The way to achieve her goals, she believed, was through studying.

“I was never encouraged for any extracurricular activities like most other middle class families in Bangladesh. I was always taught to be focused on getting high grades so that I could get into medical school.”

But along the way, another door opened up and Nusrat chose to walkthrough it.

“I decided not to study in medical school, rather to study at an international university (Asian University for Women) in Bangladesh and when I was in my 3rd year, I went to study in France with the students from sixteen different countries.

The journey was not smooth ... but I did not walk back. I learned to adapt in the new environment leaving my family and my small home town...and became the first member of my family to study abroad.”
After graduating from college with a degree in public health, Nusrat was offered a job at Innovations for Poverty Action Bangladesh (IPA), an international non-profit organization that evaluates the effectiveness of programs and policies aimed at helping the poor in 20 countries.

Once again, she faced a choice.

“I faced so many pressures to get married, as the cultural context of my country is that a girl should get married at an early age. But again I did not listen to the orthodox society voices; I listened to my inner voice which kindled me to focus on my work.”

In less than a year, Nusrat’s dedication and hard work earned her two promotions. She is now the most junior and the only female research associate at IPA.

“In Bangladesh where poverty, gender inequalities, lack of proper sanitation, and political conflicts still reign, I want to work for an improved health system in the country, and my special focus is on better health facilities for girls and women.”

Toward that goal, Nusrat now also volunteers with HOPE XXL, a global movement based on a long “action list” of achievable goals for the world, including international cooperation, human rights, economic balance, peace, and freedom and protecting the environment. HOPEXXL wants all people to be able to grade their lives as ‘good.’

For Nusrat, life is good and getting even better as she continues to make the dreams of her childhood a reality.

“I have taken new challenges in life and tried to accomplish my goals with dedication and passion,” says Nusrat. “It is true that I get upset when I cannot reach the desired destination, but I believe that all the rejections we have in our lives make us stronger. Hence, never stop facing challenges and never stop if you fail.”

Nusrat’s new goals include continuing her education abroad, getting her Master’s degree and then going on to a Ph.D.

“Since higher education for girls is still challenging in my country, I want to inspire other girls to go for higher studies through my participation. In the future, I will work in the education sector and also continue research work to ensure better health, human rights and the well-being of the girls and women in my country.”

Growing up in Bangladesh, Nusrat Jabin had to choose between what society thought she should be and her own dreams. She decided to take the road less traveled and pursue big dreams of going to college, seeing the world and becoming a doctor. In 2015 Nusrat Jabin was selected by Wedu Fund as part of their rising star leadership program. She is currently doing research at the Innovations for Poverty Actions in Bangladesh and hopes to work for the reproductive health of women and a more healthful and promising future for adolescents.

The spirit of unity in diversity

Nusrat is making an impact in India
The first question that comes to mind when you meet Richard Teka is “Why?” Why would he choose to live and work and raise a family in Kibera, the largest and most infamous urban slum in Africa? For Teka, as he’s known, the answer is simple. It’s home.

Teka grew up in Kibera until he was 7 when his father sent him to school in a rural area of Kenya. But by the time Teka reached high school, his father couldn’t afford the tuition. So Teka returned to his childhood home where hundreds of thousands of people live in desperate circumstances. Kibera, in Nairobi, is a sea of mud-walled shacks with virtually no access to water, toilets, electricity or medical care, where there is rampant abuse of drugs and cheap alcohol, and widespread cases of HIV/AIDS.

After graduating from high school in Kibera, Teka found work teaching life skills to young people and educating them about avoiding AIDS and drugs. It was while doing that that he met another child of Kibera, Abdul Hassim, who had begun a soccer club for girls to help level the playing field with boys. But Abdul knew that the girls needed more than soccer to break the cycle of poverty. So, in 2006, Abdul founded the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy, a high school where girls from desperately poor families could be educated for free.

Teka signed on to teach math, becoming one of the first two teachers at the school, working for no pay.

“I thought if I just taught math their hopes of a future would be diminished. So I taught 8 subjects to girls who were almost my age. Some were bigger than me. But they were more than willing to learn.”

Teka’s father wasn’t impressed. He demanded that Teka get a paying job. But Teka refused to give up teaching so his father kicked him out of the house.

“It was the girls who made me stay [in teaching],” Teka says. “They could be my sisters or my mother. My mother was more educated than my father but she didn’t have any work and my father never gave her money because he had another wife, which is allowed in Kenyan society. I didn’t want these girls not to get a high school education because of money. I didn’t want them to rely on their husbands for money.”

Since opening day, the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy has grown from 13 girls learning in one room, to 130 girls in a two-story building, receiving a free, rigorous education, a variety of artistic and athletic after school activities, and financial training to help improve the economic security of their families.

Richard Teka
Laboring in a Field of Dreams
And Teka has grown too. He is now the school’s Head Master and Program Director, while also pursuing night classes at the University of Nairobi.

“I wanted to work in a bank, but being in Kibera changed my vision. Most people are suffering. My mission is to make Kibera a better place for them.

“They didn’t choose to be born here. I tell them we cannot be sad at our home; that we can only make Kibera a better place; that women can make a difference in society. I want to help the girls achieve their dreams.”

Make a “Classroom Connection.” Do it alone or team up with friends to sponsor a Kibera girl for a year of education. Details at KGSAFoundation.org

A KGSA student in math class

Teka is making an impact in Uganda, Africa
"The day I was abducted as a child soldier I felt like a tree split from top to bottom by lightning."

Ricky Richard Anywar was a typical young teenager, growing up happily amid family and friends, going to school and dreaming of college in his future. But there was evil heading his way. Uganda's government troops were engaged in a power struggle with rebels, marked by brutality and genocide. Children as young as 8 were being dragged from their homes and forced to become soldiers. Ricky was just 14 when the nightmare reached his own backyard.

“We heard the gun shots. I got scared. I knew that today we were going to be abducted,” remembers Ricky.

What followed is impossible for any American teenager to imagine. Rebels tied up Ricky and his 16-year-old brother, locked their parents and three younger siblings in a grass-thatched hut and set it on fire. As Ricky and his brother watched, the Anywar family was burned alive.

“They were crying for help. It was the toughest moment in my life,” Ricky recalls.

For the next two and a half years, he and his brother endured relentless brutality and intimidation designed to transform them into battle-hardened warriors in an army of stolen children, fighting to overthrow Uganda’s government.

“I saw brutality beyond description. I saw tortures, rapes, killings and abductions. I was so scared, terrified and trembling.”

During the 20-year civil war in northern Uganda, more than 60-thousand boys and girls were dragged from their homes, schools and villages and marched to rebel hideouts deep in the bush. The boys were made to kill or be killed and the girls were used as sex slaves.

In 1991, Ricky’s brother made a daring escape. Three months later, Ricky also risked death and fled, making his way back to his home village. But instead of feeling jubilation, there was more traumatic news. His brother had also made it home but, profoundly traumatized by his experience, he had committed suicide.

Ricky Richard Anywar
The Stolen Children
“They took me to his grave and I got totally broken down again. Coupled with what I saw in the bush, how my parents had been killed, now the death of my brother, I felt that was the end of my life.”

To avoid being recaptured, Ricky walked 18 miles before hitching rides in cars and buses to the city of Jinja, nearly 300 miles from his village.

“At the bus stop, I heard people talking my language. I told them my story and that I wanted a job. One lady asked me if I wanted to work in a small gin factory. So I started working. I worked so hard for her. During the night I could work as a security guard and during the day I started learning how to brew gin. I never told anyone what happened to me. I was so ashamed that when I would think about it tears would begin rolling down my cheeks.”

Eventually, the woman agreed to sponsor Ricky so he could go to school. In the years that followed, he worked hard, earning a college degree and landing a good job in Uganda’s capital, Kampala. But home was never far from his thoughts. He felt compelled to return to the place where his happiest memories and his worst nightmares had happened, and where war was still devastating the lives of village children.

“When I told people in Kampala I was going back, they asked, why can’t you be here where it’s safe. But my heart was telling me I need to go back and help these children.”

In 1999, Ricky founded Friends of Orphans (FRO) with a mission to contribute to the empowerment, rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers, abductees, child mothers, and orphans and to help combat the spread of HIV/AIDS. FRO admits 400 young people every year, providing them with vocational and life skills, basic reading and math instruction, business management training and, most importantly, psychological support.

“I saw from my own experience that if former child soldiers could be supported, they are still useful human beings and good citizens. “It’s very difficult for someone to say, yes, I killed 100 people; it’s shameful. A girl cannot explain how they used her as a sex slave. They always fear to tell strangers what happened to them.”

And Ricky adds that working to help people come out of their difficult situations has helped him cope with his own childhood trauma.

“When I look back at my past life and who I am now with a changed heart, I always feel joy. I know there are human beings who brutalized me, killed my people, made my childhood to be bad but there are human beings who helped me. A woman in America said she wanted to adopt me. So you see the beauty of human beings as well.”

Ricky Richard Anywar is a human rights and peace building activist, educator, and Founder of Friends of Orphans (FRO). As a former child soldier and Director of FRO for over 19 years, Ricky has expertise in working with war affected communities, trauma healing and rehabilitation, and internally displaced persons.
An aging farmer sits alone by the water, quietly eating his dinner. A teenage boy on summer vacation comes up behind him hoping to be offered a bit of food to satisfy his gnawing hunger. But when he sees the old man's feast, he shrinks back. It is nothing but mud!

17-year-old Sathya Raghu remembers being shocked.

"I shouted at him out of fear and helplessness. I didn’t know how to deal with that situation. The tears rolled down from my eyes. I wondered how someone who grows food didn’t have enough to eat."

He asked the farmer why he was eating mud. In a feeble voice, the farmer explained that his crops had failed and he had no money to buy food.

Sathya couldn't sleep that night and the image of the old man surviving on mud was etched in his mind.

"I spent my leisure in the next 5 years reading about Indian farming and farmers," says Sathya. "During this period, my career was going great, a wonderful work experience. But the sight of what I saw kept coming back to me."

Sathya began thinking about how he wanted to spend the next 10 years of his life. He thought back to the old farmer and he made a decision right then and there to try to understand the real problems of rural India firsthand and come up with solutions to solve them.

As a first step, he and a college buddy took up farming. For two years, they grew crops, lived in a village with no telephones or electricity, suffered through sunburns and heat stroke and learned the hard way how tough the lives of farmers can be and how many challenges they face, including having access to markets and dealing with natural enemies, like unpredictable weather events and insects.

"Farmers have no control of environmental risks," says Sathya. "They face challenges in access to quality inputs, financing, farm knowledge and market access."
While we initially thought that market linkages alone would be enough to create significant impact, we soon realized that it was not how we wanted to solve this problem.

Based on their experiences, Sathya and his colleagues came up with a plan...an innovative idea that would help farmers outsmart the climate and other environmental risks.

“We decided to build technology that can protect a small piece of a farmer’s land from all uncertainties, to generate reliable and dependable monthly income. That’s how we made “Greenhouse-in-a-box.”

Four years ago, Sathya co-founded Kyeti with plans to bring their innovation to a wide swath of farmers.

Greenhouse-in-a-box is a tent of sorts that takes up just 4,000 square feet of land and uses a fraction of the water farmers usually need to grow their crops, while producing 7 times more food.

The 2,500-square-foot modular greenhouses allow farmers to control temperature, humidity and pests. Field officers train the farmers and give them high quality seeds and fertilizer. Kheyti also provides access to retailers for produce markets and loans to purchase the greenhouse.

Sathya spent two years testing the technology with 100 farmers to prove that it could generate about $100 a month from just one hour of work each day, with plans to reach 50,000 farmers in the next 5 years.

“I want my product to be a life changing investment for smallholder farmers, who are more than 90% of the 120 million farmers in India.”

But Sathya has an unusual perspective on why he is doing this work. Ironically, it is a kind of selfishness that ends up benefiting many others.

“My personal purpose of life is to be supremely happy from the time I get up till I sleep. I work with farmers not for any altruistic purpose, but to fulfill my personal goal of building technology and services to solve one of the world's toughest problems. The process of solving such problems at scale gives me a personal 'high' and I love that feeling!”

Before co-founding Kheyti, Sathya worked in accounting, taxation and finance. he founded a couple of Agriculture startups to increase his happiness and increase income for farmers which led to the formation of Kheyti. He writes on farm matters in Business Line, HuffPost, SSIR, SciDevNet and became a Aspen New Voices Fellow in 2016, and Acumen India Fellow in 2014. Kheyti has won many awards including MassChallenge, Millennium Alliance, Design Impact Awards etc., and has been featured in NatGeo, CNBC, and Forbes among others.
The next time you savor a steaming cup of hot chocolate, think of Shadrack Frimpong. Shadrack comes from Ghana where his father is one of the 1.6 million cocoa farmers who have made the country the world’s second leading exporter of cocoa. But there’s a catch.

“Many of the cocoa farmers, like my parents, whose hard work make this possible, live in rural areas with dire health issues. They lack nearby health facilities and struggle with infectious diseases. These challenges make them vulnerable to epidemics. For these farmers whose sweat drives the Ghanaian economy and, further, make it possible for you and me to enjoy our chocolate, this is an injustice.”

It’s an injustice that Shadrack is determined to change.

“For me, this issue is deeply personal. At age nine, I had an infection that nearly led to leg amputation because it took several months before my parents could find money to send me to the nearest hospital, five hours away.”

Shadrack says his parents are his greatest inspiration because, in spite of their abject poverty, they worked hard to provide him and his siblings with the opportunities they never had. While his father worked the cocoa farm, his mother traveled long distances to sell charcoal.

“My passions stem from my parents’ deep-seated convictions that if we strive hard enough, we can improve our own circumstances and positively transform the lives of others as well,” Shadrack says.

And his hard work did pay off. He won a full scholarship to the Ivy League’s University of Pennsylvania, the first person in his village of Tarkwa Breman to attend college in the United States. He says it was an incredible opportunity that changed the trajectory of his life. He graduated in 2015 with a degree in Biology, honored as a university scholar and the first black student to be awarded the prestigious $150,000 President’s Engagement Prize (PEP).

“Despite my great fortune, I remembered how much my community had invested in me as a child,” says Shadrack, “and I was compelled to create meaningful change for my brothers and sisters back home.”
He returned to Tarkwa Breman to establish the nonprofit Cocoa360 with the PEP as seed funding and with a pioneering ‘agro-campus’ model, which uses proceeds from a community farm plantation to self-sustain a hospital and a school within easy reach for area residents.

“At Cocoa360, we believe that education fundamentally shapes a child’s lifelong health and impacts their ability to make sound health decisions,” says Shadrack. “We, therefore, go beyond medical treatment - focusing on education for the most vulnerable targets of risky health behaviors and infections-- young girls.”

In 2016, Shadrack established the first private, tuition-free girls’ elementary school and a community clinic, sharing a 40-acre cocoa plantation that will be developed over four years.

The “Health Equity Campus,” combines prevention programs and treatment measures to form an innovative approach to health care equity.

“This work is difficult - I will admit. However, I am equally motivated by the life-changing impact that we continue to achieve.”

Today, with 20 paid staff members, 90 students, and an annual reach of 2,500 patients, Cocoa360 continues to impact lives and serves as an inspiring example of excellent and sustainable community-based care.

Frimpong’s work has caught the attention of Buckingham Palace. Recently, he was chosen out of 4-thousand applicants to be a 2018 Queen’s Young Leader Award Winner, representing Ghana. He is excited to be traveling to England this year to receive the award from Queen Elizabeth.
Shannon Murphy grew up happy and secure in rural Wisconsin amid people just like herself which didn’t make her wary of differences, it made her curious. Her loving, church-going parents believed that you should help others to have the opportunities that you have had. With that seed planted, Shannon first struck out for adventure, going to college in Hawaii and then joining the Peace Corps after graduation where her assignment surprised her.

“I was sent to Bulgaria, the cushiest Peace Corps experience of anyone. I was not living in a mud hut. I had an apartment and hot water. But I feel that’s where I grew up a little bit more; I began to understand the complexities of the world.”

“My hometown was 99% white, Christian, all very much the same, and going to the Peace Corps I really started understanding the Bootstrap Theory.”

The Bootstrap theory says the best way for people to rise in society is to create their own opportunities, essentially pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. But that didn’t jibe with Shannon’s observations.

“People in Bulgaria were working so hard and yet they were poor. Systemic oppression was keeping them in poverty. I began to understand the greater picture. Working with Turkish and Roman people [commonly called Gypsies] I saw racism firsthand. Bulgarians grow up dehumanizing Roman people as dirty, smelly and lazy. I didn’t have that preconception. It was eye opening.”

It was also the inspiration for Shannon to pursue a career in international development with the goal of addressing poverty on a larger scale. Three years ago, her path led her to work for Kibera Girls Soccer Academy in Nairobi, Kenya as the Executive Director of its Foundation, raising funds from her office in Boston to support the school’s mission and vision.

The Foundation provides financial and technical assistance to support the Kibera Girls Soccer Academy (KGSA), a high school and community center in the infamous Kibera slums of Nairobi. KGSA offers free secondary education to over 130 girls annually, in addition to artistic and athletic programming, to help create a stronger, more resilient community.
Studies show that an educated girl will delay marriage and pregnancy, is more likely to earn higher wages, invest her earnings in her family, and send her own children to school.

“What attracted me, what I love about their model,” says Shannon, “is that local people are running the school.”

KGSA believes that local problems are best handled by local residents and leaders who understand the issues affecting the community and can come up with innovative approaches to resolving them.

Shannon says construction will begin shortly on a dormitory that will provide 80 girls much needed housing and meals, in addition to a computer lab, a performance space, an indoor soccer pitch and a rooftop garden.

“I’m fighting to give girls what they need to succeed in high school: sanitary pads, computers, science equipment, field trips.

“I’m fighting for hardworking, driven, bright, intelligent girls to have the skills to successfully transition from high school into adulthood…to reach their potential and be the next generation of leaders.”

Girls like Belinda who tried to sell her kidney for money to pay the fees she needed to go to school. Shannon says the girls need a safe place to grow and learn and have fun in their adolescence and hope for a better future.

“In my life I’ve learned I may not be able to change the world but I can change the world for these 130 girls at the school. The problems are overwhelming but this is what I can do.”

Shannon holds a master's degree in global social work from Boston College. Prior to joining KGSA, she worked as the director of development for a social enterprise in Nairobi, as well as in various fundraising roles for non-profit organizations in Boston and Bangkok. She currently does her fundraising work for KGSA from her Boston office.
To see Sioni Mollel walking around her college campus in Pennsylvania you would never guess where she came from and where she’s going. Her home in Tanzania is a long way from the United States and so is the tradition in which she was raised.

Sioni is from the semi-nomadic Maasai people called ‘Nilotic’ because they settled mainly near the Nile River in Kenya and Tanzania. It is a patriarchal society where men wield the power. From an early age, girls are relegated to doing household chores such as cooking and milking.

Boys spend much of their childhood playing—although they are also subjected to ritual beatings to test their courage and endurance because they will be the leaders of the community.

“I grew up as a Maasai girl, expected to follow all the instruction that men around the community created,” says Sioni. “Men are always on top and they make the decisions for everyone. I was told that girls can’t do science, that women have the same thinking capacity as kids, that girls are not to be educated. I never dreamt of seeing myself as an educated woman because I had never seen any other girl succeed.”

So how did Sioni make the leap from that mindset to higher education? It started at home where she witnessed her mother, a school teacher who understood the value of education, being subjugated and held back by a macho culture that has little respect for women.

“It really hurts my feelings not only because she is my mother but also because I know she is able to do great things if only she is given freedom.”

Starting in first grade, Sioni would wake before dawn to walk the nearly 5 miles to school in the hills of northern Tanzania. By seventh grade, that discipline and commitment to learning earned her a spot in the tuition-free Orkeeswa School, a noteworthy accomplishment in a country where less than 25% of students have access to high school.

At Orkeeswa, Sioni stood out academically, rising to the top of her class, an achievement that didn’t sit well with some of the boys who still embraced the traditional place of girls in Tanzania.
A journey that began with a five mile walk to school in Tanzania has now taken Sioni more than 7 thousand miles to college in America. With such a stellar track record, there’s no doubt she will go very far.

“One afternoon one of my male peers, who was also my neighbor at home, said ‘I am really tired of being in a class where only girls are leading.’ What would the response to that be? I just couldn’t come up with the right answers. Now, I am glad I never argued. It felt like I got more power and motivation because I wanted to show them that it is possible for a girl to do even more than what they are expected of being able to do.”

And Sioni continued to do just that; first, by overcoming her initial reluctance and joining the school’s basketball team. “I surely didn’t want to because I had never been asked to play another sport. It was a long argument with my teacher but I chose to try it because I knew that he believed in my potential.”

Once again, Sioni rose to the occasion. By senior year she was the team captain and selected to play on Tanzania’s national team. “This is where I truly realized that I can do just as much or even more than what boys are expected to be able to do.”

In addition, Sioni joined a student film group that wrote and produced BLACK HEAD COW, a short film about forced marriage for girls, aimed at provoking discussion and, hopefully, change in traditional gender roles in Tanzania. “I want my fellow Maasai girls to see that marriage is not the only option they have,” says Sioni, “that they could be so much more than they even know about!”

Sioni was showing them the possibilities. With so many accomplishments on her resume, she applied for and won the opportunity to take a post-graduate year studying in the United States. She landed at Brewster Academy in New Hampshire, where she would acclimate to the lifestyle and expectations of being a student in a very different society.

While there, she was invited to New York to speak at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women about child marriage and her work on the movie Black Head Cow. It was another challenge that Sioni accepted, this time with confidence.

“When I first started debating and public speaking on the issues of early forced marriage, I was really nervous to see people view me as rebellious, which is not what I wanted to see myself become. Women need people to help them understand that there is a better chance for them to make the difference in their life instead of only depending on the decisions from men.” Sioni had learned the rewards of believing in herself and taking risks… which brings us back to Pennsylvania and how she ended up there.

Following her postgraduate year in New Hampshire, Sioni was offered a full scholarship to Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania where she is currently studying. She doesn’t know exactly what her final destination will be, but she does know where she is headed.

“I would like to work and develop skills that will enable me to become a useful tool for the community around me. I want to be a role model.”
Long before the #MeToo movement exposed the pain and prevalence of abuse, Tabitha Mpamira was deeply aware. At the age of 11, she had been a victim herself while living as a Rwandan refugee in neighboring Uganda. It was a traumatic experience that she kept buried until a return visit to Uganda many years later reopened the wound. Everywhere she went, she heard stories of children being repeatedly targeted for abuse.

“Young girls are assaulted frequently and justice is rarely served. Seeing a young girl being resilient, going to school, even with the knowledge that her assailant infected her with the HIV virus…I was enraged. These children need more than another person lamenting angrily at their plight. They need someone to stand up for them in their lives. They need a voice. They deserve a voice.”

In 2015, Tabitha became a voice for these children by founding the Edja Foundation, named to honor two inspiring women in her life. “My mother, Edith, dedicated her life to being a voice for the voiceless and standing up for what is right; and my mother-in-law, Janet, has survived a life of poverty and domestic violence. Through prayer and strength of will, she has managed to care for and nurture everyone around her.”

Tabitha says she started the EDJA foundation to combat child abuse, assault, and domestic violence in sub Saharan Africa, but also to tell the community, the legal system, and the abusers that “ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!”

Edja provides victims of assault, whom Tabitha calls “fighters,” with medical attention and mental health counseling. It also economically empowers the victim’s guardians and educates the community, the police, and health providers about eradicating abuse and the stigma that attaches to the victims.

“If it weren’t for [my own] horrendous experience, I wouldn’t have the zeal and passion for trauma healing that I do now. The day I decided to start this work officially, it was that still voice that whispered ‘Why do you get the luxury to wait, when they are hurting now?’ Tabitha credits her husband with making her feel safe enough to pursue her own healing, while pushing her to use her pain for good.
“When going through this life-long process of “getting over” trauma...the emotional toll is rather burdensome. It is my name on EDJA, but these [girls and women] are doing the work each day, just by waking up, and facing the pain, fear, anxiety, and depression that comes with the trauma.” And, she adds, “These young fighters, had the courage to tell someone and I did not.”

Today, Tabitha is a wife, a mother of 4, and a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology, specializing in trauma. She envisions a society where every woman and child is safe and protected from abuse. She hopes that the work of the Edja Foundation will move sub-Saharan Africa closer to the goal.

“It’s my responsibility and obligation to be part of social change; to bring healing and create space for light in every individual I meet.”

Tabitha Mpamira-Kaguri Tabitha is a Rwandan who grew up in Uganda as a refugee. She is the founder and Executive Director of the non-profit Edja Foundation which provides healing services in Uganda for young victims of sexual assault, like herself, who are forced to suffer the trauma in silence. She moved to the United States when she was 14-years-old and considers all three countries home but holds a special place for East Africa. She is a wife, a mother of 4, and a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology specializing in sexual trauma. For her work, Tabitha and Edja were awarded the 2018 Waislitz Global Citizen Award.
They are the forgotten ones -- the nearly half a million American children and youth living in foster care, sometimes for years. For many of them, being sent to live with strangers is the best alternative to a troubled home life.

Tanya Cooper was just 5 years old when she and her 3 siblings were placed in foster care. They had been living with their mother, an alcoholic and heroin addict, who could not care for them. To keep them safe, she forbid them to go outside or contact family members, many of whom were also struggling with addictions. The children were isolated, lonely and often hungry, left to fend for themselves in their Brooklyn, New York apartment.

“We had no lights, no TV, no food, or ways to communicate with the outside world,” says Tanya. “We were not allowed to talk to neighbors, although my sister often knocked on doors of people she trusted, for bread or any food. “Looking back, I can’t say it was hard. I didn’t know life any other way. I knew something was missing from my life, I just did not know what, and as long as I was with my siblings, I followed any order.”

Tanya’s sister, still a child herself, was forced to play mother to her 3 younger siblings, including a newborn baby boy.

“99% of the time, it was just my older sister, who started playing mommy when she was 5. My mom was doing drugs, and left us to care for baby Mark. When the formula and diapers ran out, and we would cry from hunger, something had to give. We would be dead from starvation if something did not change.”

That change finally came when Tanya was 5 and her sister, who was just 9, realized she could no longer cope.

“Thankfully, my sister was brilliant enough to know that we needed food and love and that she could not do it alone, so she had her first nervous breakdown, calling Child Protective Services to come and take us away.”

Tanya and 2 of her siblings were sent to an orphanage outside New York City. Baby Mark was taken in by two doctors who later adopted him. Foster care isn’t always a positive experience for children. But, for Tanya, it would eventually be a saving grace, a place where she found inspiration in the arms of her second foster mother.

“I was in awe of her as a woman, a widow who took in at least 15 foster kids, and some, she got no money for. When the foster care agency said no one wanted them at 19, she did. “She taught us all to always stand for something and when you see injustice or something wrong, don’t complain, do something.”
At 18, Tanya aged out of the foster care system, but with no family to take her, she stayed until she was 21. In the years that followed she became a model, moving to Paris and then California for work. She married, became a mother, and later divorced. She set her sights on a career in television and spent years trying to be successful. But even as she pursued her dreams, the past was never far from her mind. She began writing a book about her experiences in and out of foster care, encouraged by her little brother.

“I had been talking to him about helping foster youth. I was “waiting to ‘make it’ in television. I had no money and little resources.” “He said, if I wait to help others when I have a famous late night talk show, it may never happen. But I can start with what I have now.”

Those words became a very personal and powerful call to action for Tanya because her brother died suddenly of a heart attack at age 41.

“I had finished reading to him the night before he died and he got silent. I asked him what was wrong and he said, ‘Coopey, you got to get that book out now, it may save or change a life.’”

In 2010, to honor her brother’s memory and his advice, Tanya founded Foster Kids Unite with a mission is to provide nontraditional services to aged-out foster youth in college or trade school, kids who want to succeed but don’t have the tools to do it.

“When youth leave foster care they fall through the cracks,” says Tanya. “Often they have to drop out of college, not having enough financial help and a mentor to help them make good choices. Many end up homeless, sex trafficked, couch surfing, in rehab, in jail, or pregnant. 7% or less of foster youth make it to college, must less graduate. We want to raise those statistics.”

With the help of the local community and donations, Foster Kids Unite has been able to provide scholarships, gift boxes, and mentoring to aged-out foster youth who are pursuing higher education.

“My mission in life is to make foster youth and those without parents reach their full potential realizing that their parents were only a vehicle to get them here; it is up to them to decide their journey. And once they find their gifts and reach their goals, to go back and help others in care and aging out.”

“Know that when that little voice calls you to do something, to give service to others, act on it! Follow your heart; never let anyone tell you that you can’t do something and, lastly, pay it forward. If someone was kind to you, be kind to others.”

_Tanya has over 12 years of experience working with youth as a clinician, and over 20 years as a youth counselor and teacher throughout various communities. She graduated from New York University, with a B.A.S in Culture & Communications, and received her CASAC-T through The National Council of Alcohol & Drug Dependence in White Plains, NY, where she also sat on the committee for five years. Her book, “Surviving Foster Care & Making It Work For You” is a self-help book giving foster kids tips on getting through the system._

_Tanya performing at Levity Live_
It was a Monday morning Will Staton will never forget. As a new teacher working in an impoverished Tennessee community, he was eager and idealistic. But arriving at school that day, he was met with distressing news. Over the weekend, one of his students, just 15-years-old, had been shot and killed.

“Alex was a fantastic kid, respectful and smart. When I got the news...it felt like I had been punched in the stomach.”

Beyond the tears he shed that day, Will says Alex’s death had a profound and enduring affect on him. He spent the rest of the school year reflecting on whether he was a good teacher, questioning what he was doing and if he was effective.

“If I couldn’t help Alex, could I really help anyone?” Will was about to discover the answer.

After two years of teaching, which he describes as difficult and demoralizing because of teen pregnancy, drug use, and violence, he understood the scope of the problem facing low-income students in America, and he decided he had to act.

Will's experience in Tennessee made him appreciate how lucky he was. Education was a high priority in his home. Both his parents held advanced degrees and they had sent him to some of the most prestigious schools in the country. In 2008, during his senior year in college, he became a student recruiter for Teach for America.

“I learned about the achievement/opportunity gap between low and high-income schools while recruiting for TFA. The staggering inequity that existed appalled me.”

That led him to Tennessee, where he witnessed the opportunity gap firsthand and saw the consequences with the tragic death of his student, Alex. His mission became clear—to provide a better education in a positive environment for everyone. “The only way we can secure a better world is by giving everyone that opportunity. That is America's promise, and we are not living up to it.”

Today, Will is pursuing his personal commitment to that promise by recruiting teachers for a network of public charter schools located in low-income neighborhoods of New York City, Camden, New Jersey and Washington, D.C.
“I think teaching is the single most important job in the world. Whatever problems we face now and in the future, only education will equip us to meet them. Providing a first-rate education that empowers individuals and strengthens society is both a moral mandate and a national economic imperative.”

Will says he feels discouraged sometimes about the scale of the problem and the often apathetic public response to it. But he has a powerful incentive to keep working for change. “The murder of my student, Alex, is the motivation that keeps me going. What happened was totally unacceptable. No child deserves that fate.”

“I faced so many pressures to get married, as the cultural context of my country is that a girl should get married at an early age. But again I did not listen to the orthodox society voices; I listened to my inner voice which kindled me to focus on my work.”

Will Staton is a career educator, writer and relentless advocate for overhauling the American public school system which he says is not preparing students to meet the economic, idealogical and technical challenges of the 21st century. He is currently pursuing a Master’s Degree in International Relations.
This Glossary is a guide to the terminology used in the Hearts on Fire book and Classroom Speaker Stories.

**Adult education:** Educational programs or courses for adults who are not enrolled full-time in school or college.

**Adversity:** A state or instance of serious or continued difficulty or misfortune.

**Advocacy:** Public support for, or recommendation of, a particular cause or policy.

**AIDS:** Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a disease in which there is a severe loss of the body’s cellular immunity, greatly lowering the resistance to infection and malignancy.

**Apartheid:** A policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of an identity (i.e. racial segregation).

**Archbishop Desmond Tutu:** A South African Anglican cleric and theologian known for his work as an anti-apartheid and human rights activist.

**Autonomously:** acting independently or having the freedom to do so.

**Bureaucracy:** Excessively complicated administrative procedure within an organization.

**Camaraderie:** Mutual trust and friendship.

**Carbon footprint:** The amount of carbon dioxide and other carbon compounds emitted due to the consumption of fossil fuels by a particular person, group, or organization.

**Certified Social Worker:** A trained professional who works with the aim of alleviating the conditions of those in need of help or welfare.

**CEO:** A chief executive officer, the highest-ranking person in a company or other institution, ultimately responsible for making managerial decisions.

**Child marriage:** The formal (or informal) marriage of a child under the age of 18.

**Child soldier:** A person who serves in an army that considered a minor.

**Child sponsorship:** A poverty reduction model, based around a person or organization providing funds for an individual child (usually in a developing country) over a longer-term period or the course of their adolescence.

**Cholera:** An infectious and often fatal bacterial disease of the small intestine, typically contracted from infected water supplies.

**Civic Engagement:** The way that citizens participate in the community and advocate for duties or activities for people in their town, city, or local area.

**Civic Responsibility:** Actions and attitudes associated with democratic governance and social participation.

**Classism:** Prejudice against or in favor of people belonging to a particular social class.

**Co-op:** A cooperative society, business, or enterprise.

**Community Health Worker:** Members of a community who are chosen by community members or organizations to provide basic health and medical care to their community.

**Community stewardship:** Activities that care for the natural environment and its resources.

**Criminal defense lawyer:** A lawyer that represents individuals or companies accused of criminal activity or breaking the law.

**Crowd sourcing:** A method of garnering support (either financial or otherwise) from a number of individuals for a cause, usually via the internet.

**Cybersecurity:** The state of being protected against the criminal or unauthorized use of electronic data, or the measures taken to achieve this.

**Diplomacy:** The profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country’s representatives abroad.

**Discrimination:** The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or gender.

**Disenfranchised:** The condition of being deprived of power or privilege.

**Displaced:** Forced to leave one’s home, typically because of war, persecution, or natural disaster.

**Documentaries:** A movie, television or radio program that provides a factual record or report.

**Domestic abuse:** A pattern of physical, emotional, sexual, economic, or psychological abuse that is meant to gain or maintain power or control over another intimate partner.

**Election:** A formal and organized process of electing or being elected, especially of members of a political body or party.

**Entrepreneurial:** Characterized by the taking of financial risks in the hope of success; enterprising.

**Environmental justice:** The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

**Epidemic:** A widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community at a particular time.

**Fair-trade:** Trade in which fair prices are paid to producers in developing countries.

**Fellow:** A student or professional receiving a fellowship for a period of research or work.

**Fellowship:** Financial and professional support for research or work.
**Legislation**: An institution established with an endowment, for example a college or a body devoted to financing research or charity.

**Founder**: A person who establishes an institution or settlement.

**Freelancer**: A professional that works for different companies at different times, rather than being permanently employed by one company.

**Fundraising**: The seeking of financial support for a charity, cause, or other enterprise.

**GED**: General Educational Development, referring to a system of standardized examinations which entitle those who pass them to receive a credential considered as equivalent to completion of high school.

**Genocide**: The deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular ethnic group or nation.

**Grants**: A sum of money given by an organization, especially a government, for a particular purpose.

**Groundwater**: Water held underground in the soil or in pores and crevices in rock.

**Healthcare infrastructure**: The basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (e.g., buildings, roads, and power supplies) needed for the operation of a healthcare system.

**HIV**: Human Immunodeficiency Virus, a retrovirus that causes AIDS.

**Human Rights**: Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status, and are regularly protected as natural and legal rights in municipal and international law.

**Illiteracy**: The inability to read and write.

**Immigrant**: The action of coming to live permanently in a foreign country.

**Incubation business**: A set of business development processes intended to guide a new business through its early stages.

**Indigenous people**: Originating in a particular place, the first inhabitants of a land (i.e., First Nations People of Canada).

**Industrial agriculture**: A type of farming that involves low input of labor, fertilizer, and capital relative to the amount of extensive amount of land being farmed.

**Infant mortality**: The death of children under the age of one year. Infant mortality numbers for a country are often used to measure access to quality healthcare.

**Injustice**: Lack, or absence of, fairness or justice.

**Innovation**: A new method, idea, product, etc.

**Kismet**: Destiny; fate.

**Labor movement**: An organized effort to ensure the rights of workers, such as fair wages and safe working conditions.

**Law firm**: A business that is engaged in the practice of law.

**Liberated**: [Of a place or people] freed from imprisonment, slavery, or enemy occupation.

**MacArthur “genius” award**: An award given annually by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, given to individuals in any field that have shown “extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction”

**Malaria**: An intermittent and remittent fever caused by a protozoan parasite that invades the red blood cells. The parasite is transmitted by mosquitoes in many tropical and subtropical regions.

**Marginalized**: [Of a person, group, or concept] treated as insignificant or peripheral; not taken seriously.

**Market**: The free market; the operation of supply and demand.

**Mentor**: An experienced and trusted adviser.

**Microcredit**: The lending of small amounts of money at low interest to new businesses in low-income countries.

**Microwork**: A series of small tasks completed by multiple people (often over the internet) to achieve one unified goal.

**Migrant**: A worker who moves from place to place to do seasonal work.

**Monsoon**: A seasonal prevailing wind in the region of South and Southeast Asia, bringing rain and often flooding.

**Multiple Sclerosis**: A chronic, typically progressive disease involving damage to the sheaths of nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, whose symptoms may include numbness, impairment of speech and of muscular coordination, blurred vision, and severe fatigue.

**National security**: The safety of a nation against threats such as terrorism, war, or espionage.

**Nonpartisan**: Not biased, especially toward any particular political group.

**Not-for-profit/non-profit**: An organization not focused on making, or conducted primarily, to make a profit.

**Organic farmer**: A person that grows agriculture without the use of chemicals, pesticides, or GMOs (genetically modified organisms).

**Orthodox**: A person or their views, especially religious or political ones, or other beliefs or practices conforming to what is generally or traditionally accepted as right or true; established and approved.

**Peace Corps**: A volunteer program run by the United States government. Since its inception, nearly 220,000 Americans have joined the Peace Corps and served in 141 countries.

**Peacetime military**: The forces of a country during a time when that nation is not currently engaged in war or active combat.

**Pollutant**: Contaminate (water, air, or a place) with harmful or poisonous substances.
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a condition of persistent mental and emotional stress occurring as a result of injury or severe psychological shock, typically involving disturbance of sleep and constant vivid recall of the experience, with dulled responses to others and to the outside world.

Poverty alleviation: Efforts, either economic or humanitarian or a combination of both, that are intended to permanently lift people out of poverty.

Pre-natal care: Healthcare that takes place before the birth of a child, with the intent to identify any issues prior to childbirth to protect both mother and child.

Prejudice: Dislike, hostility, or unjust behavior deriving from unfounded opinions.

Private sector: The part of the national economy that is not under direct government control.

Privileged: Having special rights, advantages, or immunities.

Psychotherapist: A person who treats mental disorders by psychological (related to the mental and emotional state of a person) rather than medical means.

Public policy: The principles and collection of laws, mandates, or regulations established through the political process.

Public sector: The part of an economy that is controlled by the government.

Racism: Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior.

Recidivism: The tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend.

Refugee: A person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Refugee camp: A camp for the accommodation of refugees.

Research institution: An establishment dedicated to conducting research.

Safe house: A house in a secret/private location, usually used by someone looking to escape violence.

Samaritan: A charitable or helpful person.

Sanitation: Conditions relating to public health, especially the provision of clean drinking water and adequate sewage disposal.

Scholarship: A grant or payment made to support a student’s education, awarded on the basis of academic or other achievement.

Service: The action of helping or doing work for someone.

Sexism: Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.

Shop steward: A person elected by workers to represent them in dealings with management.

Social change: A change in the customs, institutions, or culture of a society, especially due to ideological or technological factors.

Social entrepreneurship: Enterprise established with the aim of solving social problems or effecting social change.

Social Inequality: The existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society.

Social justice: A broad term for action intended to create genuine equality, fairness and respect among peoples.

Social mobility: The ability of an individual or group to move up or down in status based on wealth, occupation, and/or education.

Socio-economic: Relating to or concerned with the interaction of social and economic factors.

Solidarity: Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest, mutual support within a group.

Stakeholder: A person with an interest or concern in something, especially a business.

Strike: (Of employees) refusal to work as a form of organized protest, typically in an attempt to obtain a particular concession or concessions from their employer.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Geographically, the area of the continent of Africa that lies south of the Sahara. According to the United Nations, it consists of all African countries that are fully or partially located south of the Sahara.

Sustainable: Conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A collection of 17 global goals set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015; a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. Also known as the Global Goals.

Teach for America (TFA): A nonprofit organization committed to growing and strengthening the movement for educational equity and excellence. TFA recruits outstanding and diverse leaders to become “corps members” who commit to teaching for two years in a low-income community.

Togo: A West African nation on the Gulf of Guinea.

Trauma: A deeply distressing or disturbing experience.

Typhoid: An infectious bacterial fever with an eruption of red spots on the chest and abdomen and severe intestinal irritation.

Union: An organized association of workers formed to protect and further their rights and interests.

USAID: United States Agency for International Development. The American government agency which is primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid.

Volunteerism: The use or involvement of volunteer labor, especially in community services.

Zambia: A country in East Africa which is landlocked with rugged terrain and diverse wildlife.

This glossary was compiled using some existing sources: the Oxford dictionary, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the University of Massachusetts Lowell Office of Multicultural Affairs, and Wikipedia.