



Ode profiles several leading social entrepreneurs

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Interview with Kjerstin Erickson, founder of FORGE

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Tell us a little bit about you and your company.

I'm the Founder and Executive Director of FORGE, an international organization that prepares African refugees to be agents of peace and community development. I started FORGE five years ago, when I was a junior at Stanford University. While volunteering in a refugee camp in Botswana, I was shocked to see the ways in which the international system inefficiently and inhumanely treated refugees: the people who had chosen peace over war. The refugees I met were viewed as inconvenient and incapable byproducts of war that must be warehoused and managed, rather than as self-sufficient individuals who have the potential to become agents of change and development in their home countries.

I started FORGE to create a different paradigm for managing refugee flows in times of war—one that transforms protracted refugee situations from breeding grounds for future problems into incubators for building long-term capacity and stability. We use a model

that treats refugees as a critical part of the solution to breaking the cycle of conflict rather than as a simple problem to be dealt with. Therefore, FORGE's work ensures that the time refugees spend in exile is used productively and constructively—providing refugees with the skills and resources to become self-sufficient agents of peace and prosperity. When the refugees return to their war-torn home countries, they return equipped with the knowledge, skills and leadership necessary for rebuilding their countries.

To date, FORGE has served over 50,000 refugees from five African countries. All of our 23 projects are developed and run by refugees, and range from computer training centers to libraries to preschools to agricultural loan programs.

How do you feel about the current economic situation? Does it represent a challenge or an opportunity for you and your business?

As with any major shift, the current economic situation represents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge in that donors are thinking more and more deeply about the impact of every dollar they spend, which means that organizations need to work harder and harder to prove that they will provide the maximum benefit and impact. But this kind of rethinking of old patterns provides a wonderful opportunity for less established organizations to gain traction by proving their worth; if they can show that they can achieve their objectives more effectively, they will be in a better position than ever to win over new donors who are looking to stretch each dollar. Ultimately, I think this global economic crisis will result in philanthropic dollars being spent more wisely, even if the total philanthropic pot declines. I believe that when it comes to creating sustainable change, quality is ultimately more important than quantity.

What types of metrics do you use to demonstrate your success both financially and in terms of social change?

When it comes to monitoring and evaluation, FORGE uses a strict set of program indicators individually tailored for the goals and outcomes of each project. As our impact occurs both in the short term (addressing problems of disaffection, disempowerment, and poverty endemic to refugee life) and the long-term (developing the leadership, education, and vocational skills that will aid refugees and their home countries when they eventually repatriate), our evaluation metrics are similarly structured to capture the indicators of both short and long term change.

In the short term, we use pre- and post-tests to capture knowledge gained from workshops, conduct qualitative evaluations with project participants, and track measurements of gender equity and increased per-capita income. In the long term, we look for falling HIV/AIDS rate, lowered infant mortality, increasing life expectancy, increasing primary and secondary school



graduation rates, and increased strength and stability of the local currency in global markets.

Have you always been a businessperson or did your idea stem from a passion to create change – or both?

Having started FORGE at age 20, my only previous experience in the business world involved cleaning tanning beds at the local tanning salon. I had, however, been involved in social change and nonprofits since a very young age and was raised to believe that it is my responsibility to take risks in response to injustice.