

# TURNING WHAT IS, AND WHAT IF, INTO WHAT CAN BE

*Social entrepreneurs*

by Beverly Schwartz

*The incredible journey of Greg Van Kirk, from Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala in the early 2000s to social entrepreneur extraordinaire and Ashoka Fellow, is one of the stories told in a new book called Rippling: How Social Entrepreneurs Spread Innovation Throughout the World ([www.ashoka.org/rippling](http://www.ashoka.org/rippling)). Along with Greg's story are 18 others—all social entrepreneurs—who, similar to Peace Corps Volunteers, are dedicated to improving the lives of others.*

*Rippling tackles a number of big questions. The five sections of this book represent five ripples in the pond of poverty, inequity and inadequate access to opportunity. Each of the sections includes reflections from thought leaders: Esther Dyson on restructuring industry norms; Peter Senge on changing market dynamics; William Jefferson Clinton on using market forces to create social value; Geeta Rao Gupta on advancing full citizenship; and Arianna Huffington on cultivating empathy.*

## TURNING WHAT IS AND WHAT IF INTO WHAT CAN BE.

“.....Greg was assigned to a small mountain village in Guatemala seven hours from the capital that had been hard hit during the armed conflict of 1996. After supporting a number of existing Peace Corps initiated village improvement projects, he decided that what the village could really use to improve itself economically was a restaurant where Peace Corps

volunteers, locals and tourists could go. Since starting a restaurant was off the Peace Corps “menu” so to speak, he was persuasive enough to receive special permission to proceed, but with no extra funding. This would have put a stop to most people’s plans, but equipped with his own \$4,000 U.S., an English-language cookbook and with only microwave experience as a cook, Greg, along with local cooks and waiters, opened a restaurant to help bring new money into the village.

Within months, it turned a profit. With the glow of entrepreneurial success under his belt, he started complementary services: an Internet center, a trekking business, an artisan store, a Spanish-language school, and eventually a youth hostel. All of these tourist-oriented businesses were planned with and involved on-the-ground local help and management. The aim was to create local ownership as well as financial and administrative self-sustainability so that the enterprise could function on its own and sustain not only individual livelihoods, but the village’s all-around growth and well-being. From the outset, Greg had challenged himself to devise a way to create local ownership, to find people who could understand the work and shared the same core values. If he could be successful at accomplishing that, he was sure the enterprises he was building would prosper and thrive. Over time, he realized the secret of success was to set up local

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Above: Greg teaching Margarita.



At Right: Greg Van Kirk.

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companies and identify local (or micro) entrepreneurs who would then become leaders of the business. Then, through their commitment and hard work they would earn a share of ownership. He started by offering ownership of the restaurant to the cooks and waiters who worked there. To this day, 10 years later, the businesses are all alive and well, prospering and locally owned and still attracting locals and tourists... ”

**THERE ARE MANY SEEDS IN AN APPLE—BUT HOW MANY APPLES ARE IN THOSE SEEDS?**

In order to scale and sustain the social change they envision, social entrepreneurs build institutions around ideas and create virtuous cycles of social benefit that begin when people, businesses and corporations in the community become agents of change themselves—and then influence others to do the same. Along with entrepreneurial leadership, these are the people, organizations and donors who co-create value and form the new infrastructure that leads to the establishment of an innovation. They become the synergistic manifestation of “rippling.”

This whole process is enormously contagious. Cumulatively, they build the institutions and attitudes that make local changemaking progressively easier and more respected. All of which eases the tasks facing the next generation of problem solvers. This “rippling,” catalyzed by leading social entrepreneurs and local changemakers, is the chief engine now moving the world toward what is termed an “everyone a changemaker” future—a world that will be a fundamentally safer, more tolerant, empathetic and equal, happier, and more successful than the one we live in today.

*Beverly Schwartz is the author of Rippling: How Social Entrepreneurs Spread Innovation Throughout the World, and vice president of global marketing at Ashoka, the world’s largest association of leading social entrepreneurs. Portion reprinted by permission of the publisher, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*



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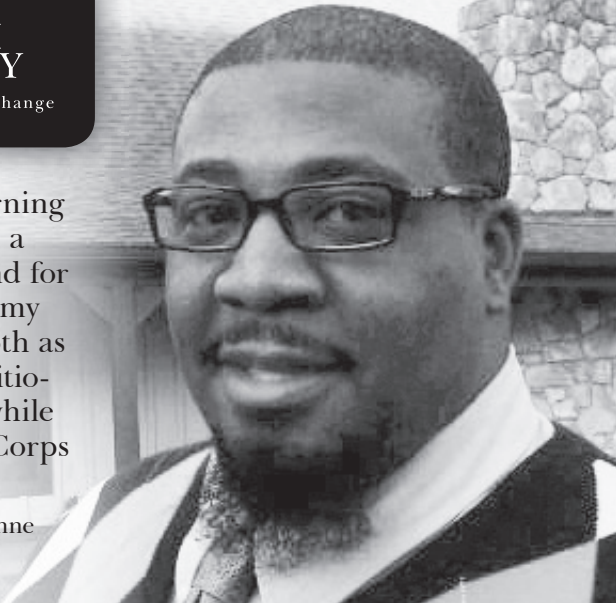
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