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A Better Place: Graduates follow their ideals into the expanding world of organizations dedicated to helping others

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A Better Place



By Ruani S. Freeman

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Anna Berke '02 remembers a particularly momentous lunch in Dana dining hall. "My friend Alex Suchman suggested that we move to D.C. after graduation. I had never been there, but I wanted to work at a nonprofit so it seemed like a good idea."

Berke was right. Four years later she was heading for Shanghai on behalf of her employer, the Special Olympics. Suchman '02, her friend, is now a policy analyst with the American Public Human Services Association's Center for Workers With Disabilities. They are just two individuals among the 10 percent of Colby alumni who work for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work in the areas of human rights, judicial equity, reproductive health, social justice, transparency in government, cross-cultural understanding, and philanthropy, among others.

There are good reasons recent college graduates find so much opportunity in the nonprofit world. According to a recent U.S. government analysis of global trends, the number of nonprofits with international affiliations grew twenty-fold between 1964 and 1998, with growth expected to continue through at least 2015.

The human side of those numbers: legions of mostly young, idealistic, globetrotting, multitasking team players who hope that through hard work they can make the world a better place.

From Jennifer Pope '96, who brings reproductive health and HIV/AIDS education to families in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Tennessee Watson '03, who guides minority youth in Durham, North Carolina, in documenting their stories, these alumni have committed to causes close to their hearts.

The work itself is neither quiet nor easy. An average workday in this world can be summarized in a word: long. “It’s action, action, action all the time,” said Suchman, in Washington. “Being close to the center of power here in D.C., seeing how the country is run, and being involved in the direction of something as big as Medicare reform—it’s powerful.”

On the other side of the world, Pope spends a lot of time on the road, traveling through the troubled region in Central Africa in her capacity as project director for Population Services International, coordinating staff scattered across eight provinces. After her staff leaves, she answers e-mail, then is off to her Lingala language class. “My days always seem extremely tiring, especially since most of it is conducted primarily in French,” Pope said.

A capacity for exhaustion is essential to work in the nonprofit sector, said Pamela Young ’91, recently named Oxfam International’s country program manager for the English-speaking Caribbean. For Young, leaping out of bed in the dead of night during an earthquake or spending hours at military checkpoints are mere mile markers on the way to the real destination: seeing girls going to school for the first time in Tanzania, supporting women’s rights in Yemen, helping people get access to doctors in Armenia, Kosovo, and Azerbaijan, helping farmers sell their goods in Albania and Georgia. “I’ve worked with people who have lost their homes in the tsunami, those affected by past or current conflict, people who have no money to put food on the table or access to water,” Young said. She meets with local government officials, runs training sessions on everything from monitoring to community participation and advocacy, talks with members of the local community where her organization is building houses, talks to the press, and sometimes spends hours sitting at checkpoints.

As it does for others in this field, the list goes on. But these jobs can offer an immediate and personal sense of job satisfaction, alumni say. Pope saw a single nurse in Mali form a women’s group, start a soap and jam business, and, with the proceeds, create a nursery school.

Kristin Saucier ’04 has seen a reshaping of Guatemala’s education policy, including an increase in spending on primary education after years of efforts of her program, PREAL (Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas), in promoting education reform there. “Most money used to go to [secondary] education, which never benefited the poor, because they drop out earlier,” she said.

Not everyone has to travel to Mali, Indonesia, or Guatemala to effect change. Danny Reed ’90 worked during and after law school



for various organizations that work to provide high quality legal services to underserved communities. Reed now is a fund raiser for Equal Justice Works, which runs the largest postgraduate legal fellowship program in the country.

“The issues [the Equal Justice fellows] tackle are some of the worst injustices in the country—homelessness, domestic violence, immigration issues,” said Reed, the organization’s regional development director. “I wanted to be part of the solution, but I also knew I lacked the disposition to do field work because I am too enraged by [the problem] to be objective. But, I had a talent for raising the resources needed to support that work.”

Choices made by these graduates are often informed by a clear-eyed assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses. As a result,



Jennifer Pope '96 with children in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she works for Population Services International. As project director for the agency, she works in eight provinces and speaks French most of the time as she provides HIV and reproductive health education.

'03 drove to Hattiesburg, Miss., in September 2005 to work for a farming cooperative, then moved to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and, with the organization Common Ground, threw herself into the historically underserved and marginalized—and storm-devastated—Upper Ninth Ward, opening the first relief operation there.

“I got there and discovered that the government was treating us like we were from a developing country, so we decided that we should look to the developing world to see how they managed their affairs,” Posner said.

Posner, who recently returned to Montville, Maine, headed a Community Gardens project in Louisiana intended to increase food security for local residents. The project involved farming a half-acre plot to grow food for the community. Her group also worked on grassroots emergency preparedness plans to try to prevent food shortages and other crises from recurring in the event of another natural disaster. They connected—through the international solidarity component of Common Ground—with counterparts in the developing world to discuss how they go about addressing these two issues. Posner’s group works by listening to the residents and addressing the most basic needs: “If they say they have no tarp to stop the rain, we get a tarp and put it on. We assess their needs and just do what is necessary. When their needs are met, they can more effectively participate in the political process.”

For others, the path has been similarly determined. Steve Murphy '99 pursued his interest in international development with a stint in Cape Verde with the Peace Corps. “I wanted to learn more about international organizations involved in global health issues,” he said. After more field work in East Timor, Murphy landed a position at Boston-based Management Sciences for Health. Despite three years of experience, he started at the bottom and worked his way up to a position as project support associate, managing logistics for three U.S. Agency for International Development-funded reproductive health projects in Ghana, Guinea, and Nigeria. He recently left that job to enter a master’s program at the Fletcher School at Tufts University.

The list of graduates, the organizations for which they work, and the global reach of their efforts are impressive. But how do these idealistic alumni make sure they really are doing good?

the phrase “a perfect match” is uttered frequently. They are where they are because they want to be, and because they weren’t afraid to hold out for the right fit or turn their backs on the wrong one.

Susan Ellsworth '03 is part of a trio of Colby alumni (with Elisabeth Maguire '05 and Lisa Reinhalter '05) who work at Food & Water Watch, an offshoot of Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen. She knew she wanted to learn about social movements, work on practical issues, and have creative freedom, so after stints with Human Rights Watch and the Howard Dean presidential campaign she moved to Washington, D.C., in pursuit of those ideals.

Moving to an unknown city with neither job nor prospects might seem naïve to many, but not to those willing to go where the action is. Some will even endure physical discomfort. Emily Posner

The Power of Giving

Ruth Bender '89, philanthropic advisor at the San Francisco-based Tides Foundation, is well aware of the stress inherent in working for underfunded nonprofits: she started her career as an events planner for the Breast Cancer Foundation. "It combined my sports and activism background, but it was draining. When you work in development, you are at the wheel all the time. The end of one proposal is the beginning of another," she said.

Like most foundations, Tides awards money to organizations that apply to it for grants. It also manages coalitions of donors who share a particular philanthropic interest. Tides made grants in excess of \$86 million last year, funding everything from water purification in Madagascar to reproductive rights in America. Though she's now making grants rather than asking for money, she is still under pressure, but now it is the responsibility to help clients clarify their mission, vision, and giving goals—and match those with the most appropriate recipient. "We have a lot of power and we have to wield it carefully," Bender said.

Well-defined values help ease that burden. Tides moved over \$300,000 out the door in the wake of 9/11 while others were still figuring priorities. "We knew what to focus on: reconciliation, alternative media, ensuring that important topics were being talked about."

In a climate of intense federal scrutiny of private donations, foundations like hers have benefited. "People are fearful of being investigated, so we manage their philanthropy," said Bender. And those who ask for help in giving their money away know what Tides represents. "Nobody comes to us and says 'what do you mean you won't fund the NRA?'" she said, laughing.

Bender sees synergy between the broad foundation of a liberal arts education and Colby's growing emphasis on civic engagement. "Creative volunteerism makes for leaders who can do budgets, build partnerships, write grant applications, plan conferences," she said.

She illustrates her point by referring to Colby's greening initiative. "Say you want organic food. You ask and answer the hard questions: 'Can it be local? What do we use to wash our plates? Could the senior class donate a solar panel?' When you graduate and want to effect change, you know the steps. You know whom to educate, what your resources are."

For Bender, Colby is still familiar territory. "I recently signed off on a \$25,000 check from a private donor [through Tides Foundation to Colby] and got a call from the development office to ask me how I wanted that listed. It wasn't my personal donation. Mine are smaller—but consistent!"

In her international work for Oxfam, Young looks for sustainability and local participation. In Guatemala, Saucier has seen the importance of local participation firsthand.

"We oversee, rather than guide, because [local people] are our eyes and ears for what is going on and they are the ones with connections. The one time we tried to replace staff with a U.S.-based expert, it was a disaster," Saucier said.

Keys to success in this arena are simple, says David Spiro '98, program director of Opportunities for Vulnerable Children with Helen Keller International in Indonesia. "Being good stewards of (funds), being true to your missions, and keeping beneficiaries at the forefront—these are the basics," Spiro said.

For an example of how not to help effectively, he looks no further than the worst of the international responses to the 2004 tsunami. "Money, politics, publicity, and competition trumped program impact, collaboration, and mission," Spiro said, "with too many egos and too much money."

An abundance of funds isn't a common problem; nonprofits generally compete for grant money and work to do more with less. Alumni talk about the need for communications skills to sell programs to foundations and other financial backers and to navigate diverse and often complex cultures and bureaucracies.

Those challenges can be expected to grow in the future. A recent study by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation predicts increased pressure on nonprofits to plan for long-term sustainability. The



Tennessee Watson '03, right, coordinator of the Youth Noise Network, a project of Community Documentary Programs at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, in Durham, N.C. Youth Noise Network is an after-school program that enables young Durham residents to produce audio, writing, and photographs that address current issues of concern to them.



David Spiro '98 discusses Indonesia's progress towards "Education for All" with President of the Republic of Indonesia Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, at right. Spiro heads Helen Keller International's Opportunities for Vulnerable Children program, which helps children in Indonesia with special needs. The program was singled out by Yudhoyono as an exemplary model, serving Indonesia's goal to strengthen education. At center is Ibu Agustiawati, head teacher of the Jakarta Early Intervention Center for Children with Visual Impairments.

same study describes a "new generation" of leaders who will need to create more overlap of business and social interests.

The challenges of working in this fast-paced and rapidly changing environment are balanced with opportunities for energetic, analytical, idealistic people to take on new tasks and weighty responsibilities—fast. And for all of the Colby alumni interviewed for this story, that's a big part of the appeal. Unlike many professions where advancement comes by ascending specific steps on the ladder, for graduates in the nonprofit sector, often the field is wide open. In fact, Colby graduates may be particularly well suited to the nonprofit world as they bring critical thinking skills, global perspective, and a sense of community responsibility to their careers.

At Colby, the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, now in its fourth year, will lead succeeding classes of students to examine their world with greater intensity, alumni said. "What is happening with [Goldfarb] is amazing," said Pope, from Africa. She said she hopes involvement with the center will move more students to explore issues beyond their comfort zones.

Student leadership and a commitment to volunteering lays the foundation for similar contributions with a grander scale, said

Alan Ashbaugh '05 at Toronto-based Free The Children. As a leader of Colby's Habitat for Humanity and the Colby South End Coalition, he was taking action as a student on and off the campus. "It informed my perspective on what I could do to change the world," he said.

Alumni credit faculty for guidance and encouragement. For Reed, now bringing legal services to the underserved, it is a fireside chat with Patrice Franko, the Grossman Professor of Economics, that still resonates. "She said, 'No matter what path you follow after Colby, know what you are passionate about and follow your passion.' ... I have never forgotten that."

And following one's passions can be its own reward.

"I measure my success in terms of the interactions I have," said Watson, in North Carolina. "I am rich in that regard. ... I know that it is considered 'unprofitable' to work for a nonprofit, and yes it's the nonprofit hustle that I do, but it is inspiring, and amazing, and I certainly 'profit' from it—it fits me."

Said Maguire at Food & Water Watch: "This job makes a tremendous difference in the quality of my life. I am happy every single day."