

CHAPTER 1

That Aha! Moment

When Inspiration Strikes

THE INSPIRATION FOR A WONDERFUL NONPROFIT can come to you at any time. Indeed, it can be so capricious that social entrepreneurs sometimes joke that it was rather inconvenient, interrupting their plans not just for the day but for the decade or more. And it is true: a great nonprofit idea takes over. It keeps its own schedule. For you as the seeker of these novel, earth-shaking ideas, it is a matter of opening yourself to the unexpected, of letting go of your analytical capacity—that fabled, overworked left brain—and putting your faith in your underutilized creative side.

The best nonprofit ideas are off the beaten path, and they can shake you up a little. At forty-three, Anne Heyman was the mother of three young boys and thought of herself as an Upper West Side housewife when she decided to start a youth village for orphans in Rwanda, a place she had never been. Darell Hammond was twenty-two and just a high school graduate when he was struck by the idea that all children should have a playground close to home, and has dedicated his life to organizing local communities to build those playgrounds, thereby strengthening the communities themselves. Whether to Rwanda or the world of play, both of them found that their work took over their lives. With Heyman, she came to feel that she was always focused on Rwanda, regardless of whether she was there physically. And Hammond became a kind of play-master,

The Art of Doing Good

developing expertise in the psychology of playgrounds even as he struggled to find the funds for new playground construction. Regardless of whether they have been at their nonprofits for one year or twenty, few of the eighteen social entrepreneurs we profile in this book have any plans to change. They're lifers. A single burst of inspiration can change your life. It will create your life's work, almost whether you want it to or not.

Creativity in the nonprofit arena is often said to come "out of the blue," or to be, as someone might say with a puzzled shrug, "a total fluke." But on closer examination, there is usually a certain deep logic to it. Indeed, it often seems as though those struck by this kind of creativity were primed for that moment of brilliant insight by various events and relationships or ideas they've been exposed to throughout their lives, only they didn't know it. They have the idea because it fits them. And that will likely be true for you, too. The idea grows out of your experience, outlook, and personality. It is rooted in your life story, your philosophy, your aspirations. It is a seed within you that has come to flower as an expression of yourself, possibly the truest expression of yourself. For virtually all of these eighteen social entrepreneurs, building a nonprofit is, outside of their family lives, the most intensely personal thing they have ever done. It will probably be no less for you.

Truth to tell, in philanthropy as elsewhere, the truly transformative ideas are rare. Pedestrian ones, alas, are all too common. (If it were otherwise, the world would be a far finer place than it is.) The best ideas, however, are somehow organic, and they grow bigger the more you think about them. It can take a little while to see their full dimensions. That can be a way to tell just how good the idea is. The best ones expand like a gas, and they have a lift to them. And that lift creates a chain reaction, inspiring other ideas to make the big one happen. To the most astute, the inspiration doesn't come as an intellectual concept,

one that is easily expressed in words, but as a full blasting vision, showing with startling clarity how the world is about to be.

Jordan Kassalow: Finding Vision

It can be staggering, that first moment of inspiration. Jordan Kassalow was training to be an optometrist when he had the experience that changed his life. Or two experiences, really, for the first made the second all the more meaningful. When he was young, Kassalow did a lot of mountain climbing and one summer he joined a couple of friends in climbing in the Brooks Range of mountains in Alaska. It rained heavily as the three of them ascended to the peak, but they reached the summit safely. The rain was slashing sideways, driven by gale-force winds, and the two others retreated to the tent, but Jordan took a seat on a rock “in a very meditative state,” he said, “just becoming one with the universe, if you will.” But sitting there in the fierce rainstorm, he was also disturbed to sense that, as he says, “the universe was conspiring against me, and it was telling me I was just dust in the wind, and that I didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things.” Affronted, Kassalow stood up and, for reasons he can’t now recall, he started yelling back at the wind, “I do matter! I do!”

That Lear-like moment was a prelude to the second event six months later that proved to be even more pivotal. Along with some other students and professors of optometry, Kassalow was providing eye care to poor people in the Mexican outback. His very first patient was a seven-year-old boy whose vision was so blurred and indistinct that he was placed in a school for the blind. In that part of Mexico, the families of the blind suffer a double burden. Besides the distress of raising a blind child, they are likely to be ostracized in their community for bringing bad luck to the village.

The Art of Doing Good

Unsure what to make of this particular child's affliction, Kassalow brought him over to his professor, who examined the boy's eyes for a few minutes and then returned him to her student. "Jordan," she told him impatiently, "this boy isn't blind. This boy is just profoundly nearsighted." He had a prescription of over a minus 20, which is myopic to the absolute extreme. Kassalow recalls,

We had brought down five thousand pairs of glasses, categorized by strength. And she said, "Go to the strongest box and see if there's anything that's remotely close to what this guy needs." And I did, and sure enough, there was a pair of glasses that was very close to his prescription. And so I was the one who put these glasses on this boy's face. And as the lenses aligned with his eyes, his whole face changed from the blank countenance of a blind person to this beautiful, animated smile of joy of a seven-year-old boy. I was the first person he ever saw in his life. And I remember at that moment looking up and saying to the heavens, "See? I do matter."

And that is the moment it came to him. He would do for thousands, tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of poor people around the world what he had just done for this one boy. He would bring glasses to the masses. He would let the world see.

Rachel Andres: Making Connections That Save Lives

Call them sparks, or lightning bolts—the best of these ideas all have a crackling, high-voltage quality, and, like electricity, they are burning for something to do. When the bold, transformative idea came to her, Rachel Andres was a forty-four-year-old Los Angeles-based

THAT AHA! MOMENT

project consultant for Jewish World Watch (JWW), an organization dedicated to preventing another holocaust, and she did not think of herself as a particularly creative person. Her job was to raise awareness of the plight of the women survivors of the Darfur genocide. This was 2006, and the world was just beginning to focus on the genocide in Darfur. JWW took the lead in focusing public attention on the thousands of people fleeing their homes in Sudan for the relative security of vast makeshift camps across the border in Chad.

Janice Kamenir-Reznik, the JWW's cofounder and president, delivered a moving speech that year at Andres's synagogue in Los Angeles about the plight of Darfuri refugees. Horrified by the devastation and suffering, Andres was eager to help. Kamenir-Reznik hired her to organize an event highlighting the horrendous situation the surviving women and girls had endured—and maybe to find a project JWW could support, too.

One idea was to raise funds to build a rape counseling center in one of the camps, but that didn't feel right to Andres. Although counseling was necessary for the recovery of the women, the whole notion of a counseling center seemed too "Western" if the women and girls still needed basic food, water, and safety for survival. Plus, Andres wanted to concentrate on prevention, not treatment. She realized that the camps weren't entirely safe for these refugees, and in some ways they posed their own hazards. The cooking situation, for instance. Virtually all the food supplied by the UN—beans, macaroni, rice—needed to be cooked in the traditional manner on a three-stone wood fire, as there was no gas or electricity. But that required firewood, and, for each family, the monthly allotment from the UN lasted only a week. When it was gone, the mother or daughter often had to venture outside the camp to search for more. Outside the confines of the camp, however, lurked vicious Sudanese militia who preyed on any number of the women, raping them.

The Art of Doing Good

To Andres, the prospect of these refugees' being attacked again as they scavenged for firewood was unbearable. It had to be stopped—but how? By a complete coincidence, a JWW volunteer had been researching solar cooking for a book, and he thought it might work in the camps at Darfur. Andres hardly knew what a solar cooker was, but it seemed somehow right, and she could not get it out of her mind. Instead of cooking with firewood, the women would cook their food with sunshine. There was certainly no shortage of that in Africa! Instead of venturing out into the hazardous bush, the women could remain safely in camp to do their cooking. It was so simple, it was ingenious.

Andres Googled “Darfur solar cooker” and discovered a small pilot project in Chad using five hundred solar cookers for the eighteen thousand Darfuri refugees there. But who provided them? The first Web sites she found gave no clue. Instead they drew Andres into what she called a “little maze,” with many wrong turns and backtracks, until she turned up an eccentric Dutchman named Dr. Derk Rijks. He had created a program for the refugees through an American organization called Solar Cookers International. After many emails, Andres was finally able to reach Rijks by phone. He described the “CookIt” solar cooker model he was using. It could hardly have been more basic: two flaps of cardboard, both of them covered with reflective tinfoil to focus the sun's rays, and a black pot underneath for the cooking.

Rijks welcomed Andres's assistance. He did not have the capability at that time to expand the program, but Andres hoped JWW could help him drastically increase his output to provide all the families in the camp with solar cookers. Maybe they could even outfit all of the dozen refugee camps in Chad.

Andres was a project consultant, with an emphasis on community relations and conference organizing. It was not in her job description to start a massive project to bring solar cooking to

THAT AHA! MOMENT

Darfuri refugees. But if JWW was trying to build support for the refugees, she reasoned, this was a more enticing approach than just organizing another conference. It was clear to her that this was a project that might well attract donors, especially female donors. She figured they would be saving lives, one by one. So she set her goal at providing two solar cookers for every family in the camps—enough to cook a full meal.

The key to the success of the program was the price, and this was Andres's other insight. The elements of a cooker (and its delivery) were all simple enough—the cardboard, the tinfoil, the shipping, the ground transportation, the supervision. But they added up. To how much? It took much discussion through calls and emails to Rijks and his various suppliers to find out. Rijks himself did not know how much the cookers cost, but by pricing out the various elements and adding them up, Andres came up with a serviceable number: \$30 per cooker. Andres could imagine the pitch: for \$30 you can keep a Darfuri woman in the refugee camps and reduce her chances of rape and attack. (Or you could turn the page, in the words of a similar magazine pitch from years ago.) To donors, the pitch was irresistible—and it redounded to the credit of JWW, too.

Over five years later, in 2012, more than eleven thousand people have contributed financially—at synagogues and churches, in schools and offices—many of them giving \$30, \$60, \$90, and other multiples of \$30 from there. And although the price has now risen to \$40 per cooker due to inflation, the progress continues. Four camps holding over ninety thousand people have been served with enough cookers to provide one to each family, and another three camps are about to be added, with seventy thousand people more.

And the results for the Darfuri women? According to a study by the JWW, before the cookers arrived, virtually every woman in the camp had to leave to hunt for firewood at least once a week,

The Art of Doing Good

and often far more frequently than that. Since the arrival of the cookers, half of them never leave the camp at all. And those who do, leave far less often. Altogether, trips outside the confines of the camp had been reduced by 86 percent.¹ The JWW was not able to determine the resulting decrease in rape and attack, but it is fair to assume that it was roughly commensurate.

It is quite a story, this tale of a woman in Los Angeles who, on the strength of a single idea, saved countless women and girls of the refugee camps in Chad from rape and violence.

But, of course, these bursts of insight, these Aha! moments, are just the beginning, never the end. For the real power of such inspiration is never felt just by the individual who experienced it. It is passed like a pulse of electricity along filaments that proceed in every direction, lighting up the public, potential donors, staffers, board members, and countless others as it goes charging forth through the universe.

Carolyn LeCroy: Making Good of a Bad Situation

Not all moments of inspiration are so uplifting. Sometimes they come out of a period of disquiet, a bad time that allows in a certain soulfulness that is otherwise kept at bay. In these cases, the charitable effort isn't so much inspired as it is empathic, allowing the creator to see life from the point of view of someone with whom she would otherwise have no connection. It can take darkness to see the light.

That was true for Carolyn LeCroy. She was a freelance television producer in Norfolk, Virginia, when she made the mistake of a lifetime and got nailed for it. She let her ex-boyfriend stash what he called "some stuff" in her storage unit. She had a vague idea what the stuff might be, but figured it would be gone in a couple

of days, so it wasn't worth worrying about. Unfortunately, the police came through the area with drug-sniffing dogs on another matter, and they went wild over the "stuff" of LeCroy's ex. It proved to be a good-sized bale of marijuana, well over the five pounds that constitutes a felony under Virginia law. Facing charges of possession with intent to distribute, plus conspiracy, she was found guilty and sentenced to fifty-five years. "When I heard that, my knees buckled," she remembers. "My attorney reached for me, because he thought I was going under, and two sheriffs came up to grab my arms. I went into complete shock. I'd never had as much as a parking ticket, and now this?"

Happily, all but six years of her sentence were almost immediately suspended, and, with parole and time off for good behavior, she ended up serving just fourteen months in the Virginia Correction Center for Women. "When you say 'just,'" she protests, "as in 'just fourteen months,' that may make sense compared to someone serving twenty-five years, but *you* try serving one day in prison, just one."

It was a long hitch, but one thing made it seem shorter: regular visits from her two sons, David and Mike, then nineteen and twenty-four. They came to visit her a couple of weekends a month, and Carolyn wasn't sure she could have gotten through her time without them. She noticed that a large number of the other women never had any visitors at all, and it was awful. "I saw depression," she recalls. "I saw hurt. I saw anger. And then they get pissed off at you because you got company, and you were in a good mood."

"And I thought about that and I thought about that," but it wasn't until she was finally freed from prison and was speaking to her younger son, David, that the penny dropped. She asked him, "If I could have given you anything from prison, what would it be?" And he looked at her dead-on and said, "You."

The Art of Doing Good

“And that,” she says, “is when it hit me.” The idea came not as a concept, but as an image. Two images, actually: “Of a woman in front of a camera in prison, and of her children watching her at home.” Thus began the Messages Project.

Some of the time, the children didn’t want to come to the prison, but more often they simply couldn’t, because the distance was too great and they had other obligations. But the video of Mom or Dad would come to them from prison, as if delivered by Netflix. “If the kids can’t get to the moms, what about the moms getting to kids?” LeCroy asked herself. She would use her skill as a film producer to create videos of these women talking to their children, and then send the videos to them. At the very least, the children could see that their mother was fine. Beyond that, they might be able to still feel the love.

“It was very simple,” LeCroy says. A video camera, a videotape, a tripod, a camera operator, an interviewer, and that would be it. Out of prison, she wrote to the Virginia Department of Corrections asking for permission to put her idea into effect. She got major support from one of the principals in the prison schools, and, at his recommendation, she had included some statistics on the connection between the maintenance of the parent–child bond and a decrease in the likelihood that the child would become an inmate. As it was, the child of a convicted felon is six to ten times more likely to end up in prison than other children, which was a key part of her argument. And LeCroy can understand some of the reasons why: children of prisoners are traumatized by the separation; they feel abandoned, unloved, and guilty, as if they themselves were responsible for their parent’s incarceration. “But if you can reestablish the bond, you see a huge difference in the behavior. Once they actually hear Mom say, ‘I didn’t abandon you. This was not your fault. I love you. Don’t go down this road. Let me tell you where it leads.’ It’s one thing to write this down in a

THAT AHA! MOMENT

letter, but it's another if the child can actually see his mom saying these things. It's a huge difference. Because you cannot hide from the camera's eye. You can't fake the body language or conceal the facial expressions."

LeCroy received permission from the warden, and it looked like she was in: she would go into Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, a maximum-security facility for violent offenders—women convicted of murder, attempted murder, vicious assaults, and the like. Despite the ferocity of these crimes, the warden was unusually progressive; she could see the benefits of the program and wasn't put off by the security issues posed by a video camera. LeCroy would produce her first set of videos in time for Christmas. She had twenty-seven inmates lined up to send messages to their loved ones. But just five days before the shoot, a top administrator said no. Permission revoked. No explanation given.

"Now, anyone who knows me knows I have the tenacity of a pit bull," says LeCroy. It is a characteristic that is widely shared among social entrepreneurs, who become immune to the word no. An important first lesson: if you are not assertive and accept rejection easily, do not pursue social entrepreneurship! "With me, until the very last door is closed and locked and nailed shut, I'm going to keep trying to get in." So she kept at it. She shifted her sights to Mother's Day, which was the birthday of her older son, Michael, so it seemed propitious. And this time, permission was granted and stayed granted.

For this one, seventy-five women signed up, and, one by one, they filed into the makeshift studio for their cameos. LeCroy had a cameraman and an assistant, but she was the director, the reassurer-in-chief, and the one ready with the Kleenex when things got emotional. To preserve the women's privacy, she refused to have any guards standing by; she would take her chances with her

The Art of Doing Good

own safety. (She never once felt endangered.) A group of students from the prison's school of cosmetology helped do the women's hair and makeup. Each video ran fifteen minutes. Some of the prisoners spoke directly from their heart and into the camera. Others relied on notes to remember everything they wanted to be sure to say. Others read from the "gently loved" children's books that LeCroy provided and could send home with the video. Many of them tearfully showed off the pictures they had of their children, to show that they still had them in their lives, every day. The male prisoners generally avoided openly showing feelings, until they got in front of the camera and the hard shell came off. One brought a basketball to demonstrate his jump shot; another taught his son how to tie his shoes. All of them, it was clear, had been desperate to connect with their children.

When the videos arrived in the mail, there were many reports of enthralled kids cuing them up to watch the videos again and again: the flickering image on the TV screen the closest they would get to Mom or Dad. The books their moms or dads read on video were treasured by the children, often ending up under their pillows at night.

The media attention was overwhelming. Newspapers and local TV shows covered it, and NPR did a story on *All Things Considered*. "It was incredible the amount of press coverage we got," says LeCroy. One of the particular delights was seeing some of the bureaucrats who had turned her down so harshly do an about-face once they saw how much publicity they could gain for their institutions, and for themselves, by getting involved. LeCroy expanded her efforts from one prison to three, but it became exhausting. LeCroy and her cameraman contributed their time, including the considerable travel time, but each video cost \$10, making it \$750 for that first crop of messages. Not knowing where else to turn for the money, LeCroy paid for that first set herself. The next set would pose a problem.

THAT AHA! MOMENT

For LeCroy, as for the others, the beginning is just the beginning. Much more lay ahead, and each step of the process involves a winnowing to create laserlike focus. Just to get a nonprofit launched is an accomplishment, and compelling testimony to the power of the idea and to the talents and inspiration of the founder. Still, as LeCroy was discovering as she maxed out her credit card, it is one thing to get a nonprofit up, and it is quite another to keep it running.

*The Best Ideas Combine the Familiar
with the Unexpected*

The strength of a truly winning idea comes from the combination of its novelty and familiarity, which often involves taking a familiar concept and using it in an unexpected context or setting. In psychology, this is called lateral thinking. You take an idea from column A and join it to one from column B. If the new pairing is truly fresh, it can unleash startling energy—if, that is, it is novel enough to be arresting, practical enough to be effective, yet simple enough to be almost immediately graspable. It has to be clear what the idea is. Everybody knows glasses—Kassalow’s inspiration was in placing the emphasis on the sight-deprived in developing countries. And videos are familiar enough—they were new only as a medium for the messages from prisoners to their children. A solar cooker was more inventive, but it was easily understood. Andres’s brilliance was in bringing them to the camps at Darfur. The ease of explanation is always key to any marketing effort. The best pitches are the ones that the customer makes herself.

It all starts with one person and grows from there. For all three of these social enterprises, it was no easy matter to scale up, to move from one cooker to many, from one pair of glasses to hundreds

The Art of Doing Good

of thousands, from one prison in Virginia to several throughout the country. In the case of Kassalow, it took fifteen years. Much of the energy for that effort comes from the idea itself, if the idea is powerful enough, but the rest has to come from the person. These brilliant innovations, after all, are just ideas or visions. If the founder has a personal connection to the work, as LeCroy, Andres, and Kassalow all did and most founders do, he or she will bring yet another pocket of energy to the endeavor. In the end, it's caring and passion that make the effort so explosive.

But passion alone will not make for a brilliant nonprofit. Any enthusiasm has to be checked by a skepticism that proceeds from the inside out. It is not enough to go wild over an idea; you'll need to let it rattle around in your head as you ask yourself, *Will this really work? Does anybody need this? Can I possibly find the resources to accomplish this? Am I up to it? Is it worth it?* And even—*Is it safe? Will it, as the physicians say, do no harm?* Next, check with friends and family members to see if they share your enthusiasm. And then go outward from there to nonprofit professionals and specialists in the field. Excitement is one thing, but realism is another. If you are the only one who believes in your idea, you should probably shelve it and wait for another one to come along that grabs others, too.