

Changing People's Lives

While Transforming Your Own

PATHS TO SOCIAL JUSTICE & GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS



INCLUDES
DVD 

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International Jetsetters

This chapter is the first of several that profile stories and insights from people who are actually out in the field, taking action and changing lives all over the world. What have they learned from their experiences? How did they figure out which path was the right one for them? And what advice do they have for others who also want to make a difference in the world?

What the stories in this chapter have in common is an international focus. Most of the organizational founders were exposed to travel during their college years, experiences that haunted and inspired them in certain ways. They had developed a love for adventure and an appreciation for the people they met along the way. They were moved by the plight of those who are subjected to life-threatening challenges. They had grown up, just like the rest of us, watching video footage on the news of starving children in Africa, or destitute street-people in India, Brazil, Indonesia, or the Middle East, and decided they just had to do something. They couldn't be observers any longer; they had to take some kind of action.

You will not have heard of most of these people. With few exceptions, they don't make their way into the media, nor are they featured on talk shows or magazine covers. Yet they are working across the globe in some of the most inhospitable places on Earth, trying to help local communities turn their lives around. Contained within these stories are not only case studies of what can be done to advocate on behalf of human rights and social justice issues, but also the inspiration for you to become involved in ways to make the best use of your talents and interests.

BELIEVE YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE:
ARIANE KIRTLEY, FOUNDER OF AMMAN IMMAN

The first step in doing something worthwhile is believing that it is within your capacity to do so. Ariane Kirtley, founder of Amman Imman—Water is Life—admits that the idea that any of us can really make much of a difference might seem preposterous when the scope and magnitude of human problems seem so overwhelming. Yet she believes that this is not only possible but highly likely, if you trust yourself and persist in your efforts. If you fail the first time, or don't meet your expectations, then just change the goals to those within reach. This idea of "thinking small" is a theme we will revisit again and again. It is from such modest efforts that sometimes very large effects result.

"I was always taught that if I have a dream or a vision, to go for it," Ariane explained. "My parents always encouraged me to do that and never take a traditional path. So if you see something, or are passionate about something, even if everyone tells you it is impossible, trust your instincts, and believe that you can make a difference. Even if no one else out there wants to make a difference or even pay attention to what the issue really is, go for it, run for it, because you only have one life. And you have to make the most of the life that you have."

Ariane attributes this altruistic drive to her parents, but it is possible to develop such a passion at any stage in life, especially from instructors and mentors in college, where your main goal is to expand your interests and skills. All it takes is an openness to new ideas and a willingness to try some things you've never done before.

Ariane's parents were photographers for *National Geographic*, so her childhood was spent traveling the globe. From the time she was six months old, she was moving through Africa, living in Algeria, Gambia, Senegal, Mali, the Ivory Coast, and Niger. "We got to live in the bush, so I really grew up seeing how these people lived. I always looked to the people in these villages as my family, so when I went to university, I always knew I would go back to Africa and do something for them."

Ariane studied anthropology in college and later earned a master's degree in public health. During the summer of 2003, she returned to Niger in West Africa to intern for CARE International on a hygiene and sanitation program in

Believe You Can Make a Difference: Ariane Kirtley, Founder of Amman Imman



Ariane Kirtley, founder of Amman Imman, an organization that helps provide clean water for communities that are literally dying of thirst.

the rural areas of the Konni district. It was during that student internship that she first became aware of what would become her life's mission. She visited the Azawak region, the poorest place in one of the poorest countries in the world, a place inhabited by a half-million people without regular access to water. She was stunned to learn that the people walk 30 miles each day, 15 miles each way, to obtain water from a reliable source! In addition, the people have no access to schools or health care. They live in an area that is so remote that few government agencies or organizations even know that they exist.

Even with a lifetime of experience spent traveling and living throughout Africa, Ariane had never seen anything quite as tragic as the plight of the Azawak region. The place was calling out to her. If she didn't do something for these people, nobody else would. "I couldn't believe that nobody was doing anything to help these people who were dying of thirst. All over Niger, people

were receiving packages of rice and millet, but in this region people had no clue that aid was even being given to other parts of Niger.”

During her studies, Ariane learned that half of the children in the area died before the age of five, the highest mortality rate in the world. Many of these children died of malnutrition, disease, and starvation, but a great number died simply because they had nothing to drink. It was all the more remarkable because it wasn't that they had no access to clean water, but to any water at all.

Once she discovered what was going on, Ariane naively believed that all she would have to do is to tell people what was going on and they'd do something. "CARE International tried to help. They sent a team up there to check out the situation, and were blown away by the poverty. But my proposal [to dig wells in the area] was denied, because international aid agencies don't want to work in such a remote and difficult area. Secondly, nomadic people are hard to work with, because they are constantly moving. And thirdly, most of the people in this region are minority ethnic groups that most people are not interested in helping.”

This is the point in the story at which most people would give up. You found a dire situation. You saw a need that you could fill. You came home, knocked on doors, begged organizations for support, talked to people in power about what could be done, and all you got were rejections and discouragement. Your conscience clear that you had done all you could, you'd shrug and move on to something more practical and feasible, something that you could actually accomplish.

But for Ariane, the more excuses she heard, the more furious and determined she became to persist in her goals. "I thought these excuses were complete crap. First of all, it wasn't dangerous at all. People were extremely kind and generous to me everywhere I went. I never felt threatened. But most importantly, people were dying! I knew that something had to be done, and that if I wasn't going to do it, no one would.”

One thing that was stressed repeatedly in Ariane's education was that one should never, *ever* try to do anything on your own, that you must work within existing organizations and infrastructure; anything else, is doomed to failure. But what do you do when nobody will help? She couldn't just walk away.

Ariane launched her own grassroots organization called Amman Imman (translated as "water is life"), which eventually became part of The Friendship

Caravan, an American organization dedicated to promoting multicultural understanding through educational programs and humanitarian outreach. Ariane figured she needed to raise a minimum of \$250,000 to dig just two wells because the water was so far underground, estimated to be at least 1,000 feet. From her research, she learned that contractors would need to bring in oil drilling equipment to dig that far.

Because she grew up in a family of photographers, Ariane used her own talents to take photos of the people of Azawak to show in exhibitions; these turned out to become excellent fundraising forums. Other people jumped on board with the project, attracting donors and sponsors, organizing athletic events and walkathons. Much to her surprise, Ariane actually enjoyed the fundraising part of her plan. Now came the really hard part.

“I went back to Niger and did some research on what kind of infrastructure needed to be built, and dealt with government authorities—where the corruption and greed was unbelievable. You had to bribe people everywhere. I had to stay very morally solid and not pay bribes. Then we had problems internally with people we worked with who were not in it for the right reasons. There was a lot to deal with.”

By her reference to the “right” reasons, Ariane is bringing attention to the reality that people volunteer for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with helping people and everything to do with inflating their own egos and status within the community. People have hidden and ulterior motives that may not be visible until much later. This is one reason it is so crucial to work with those you really trust.

The physical challenges of working in 120-degree heat were also brutal for Ariane. “I had to remind myself that I was saving lives, and that I only have one life to live. I knew that I had to live my passion, live my dream, no matter what anyone else told me.”

In 2007, Ariane and her team completed the first well, hopefully the first of many she will build in the future. “I saw my friends literally dying. I was afraid to go back and see who had died since I had been gone. These weren’t just statistics—these were my friends! They had literally offered me their last bowl of water. I couldn’t let them down. I made a promise to them I would come back with water, but I had no idea how difficult it would be to keep that vow. I know now that we’ve done something pretty amazing, saving people’s lives.”

A book of hope, of resilience, and of passionate and courageous efforts to change people's lives far beyond the narrow scope of your own community and immediate circle of influence

Imbued with both a fitting sense of urgency and a profound sense of hope, *Changing People's Lives While Transforming Your Own* tells the stories of faculty, students, and professionals from a variety of fields who reached out to others after witnessing an injustice, poverty, or need in the lives of the most neglected and marginalized in society—and in reaching out, were transformed through the process of helping others.

Coauthored by two individuals who have devoted their careers to making a difference in the lives of others, this stirring book is a call to action, for both the young and young at heart, and is filled with inspiring and real-life narratives from individuals from a broad range of helping professions such as social work, psychology, and counseling.

Changing People's Lives While Transforming Your Own introduces you to the basic concepts related to social justice, global human rights, service learning, community activism, and altruism, with a look at:

- The elements that are often part of service learning, social justice, and charitable work—including the joys, satisfactions, frustrations, and crushing disappointments
- Why people help, how they do it, and what they get out of their efforts
- Suggestions for how to create the kind of experiences likely to be the most satisfying and transformative
- Countless opportunities for readers to stand up for the rights of those who are oppressed

In addition to an accompanying DVD featuring stories, insights, and lessons culled from a social justice mission to Nepal, *Changing People's Lives While Transforming Your Own* encourages readers to be better world citizens in the cause of promoting human freedom and equality. It shows how even modest efforts on a small scale can have profound effects, offering a vision of social justice in which professionals in a variety of fields can promote change as advocates, activists, and leaders.

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