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## Interview with Gretchen Wallace, founder of Global Grassroots

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While economic upheaval has caused many businesses to fail, *Ode* has interviewed several entrepreneurs who have found ways to thrive and remain focused on positive social change. We interviewed them about their companies, how they view the current economic situation, how they define success, and how they came to combine their business skills with their passion for change.

To read more about how social entrepreneurs are going mainstream, click [here](#).

| March 2009 issue



Photo: Global Grassroots

### Tell us a little bit about you and your company.

I grew up the daughter of a Navy Admiral with a strong sense of service. Since living in the Philippines as a child, I always knew I would somehow work to address the injustices and disparities in our world. I was exposed to the profession of social entrepreneurship during business school at Dartmouth and joined Ashoka after getting my MBA.

In 2004, during a trip to visit South Africa's social entrepreneurs working on HIV/AIDS, I met a woman named Zolecka Ntuli in a township outside of Cape Town. She was 25 years old and unemployed. When she discovered a 12 year old girl was raped by a group of 12 year old boys because they thought it was their right to have sex with the girl, Zolecka set about to address the issue. Using pocket change to buy some bread, she gathered fifteen women to talk about rape. After six months, she had 45 people meeting weekly including fifteen men. Hearing her story and the challenges she faced in her work, I realized that at the grassroots level in the most marginalized communities worldwide there were courageous women determined to address critical issues facing women and girls, but struggling without the training and resources necessary to ensure their success. I decided to dedicate my work towards supporting these emerging change agents and their ideas.

I've also always believed in inner-driven change—that decisions made with the greatest level of awareness will ensure the wisest response and most potent, effective results. I've now spent about seven years training in the fields of personal transformation, meditation and alternative healing. Bringing my passions together, I founded [Global Grassroots](#) in 2004 to advance what I call "conscious social change" among grassroots, marginalized women.

Since 2006, Global Grassroots has trained 250 change leaders in Rwanda dedicated to advancing women's rights and wellbeing. In the past year, we funded ten locally-designed projects that will serve thousands of vulnerable women and girls, by addressing issues of domestic violence, water access, child rape, prostitution, property rights, HIV/AIDS, discrimination and illiteracy. We currently have 16 projects in development that will be ready to launch in 2009 and one project among Darfur refugees in Eastern Chad.

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

Absolutely. Charitable giving has declined significantly, endowments have shrunk, grants have been frozen—the economy is taking a major toll on the citizen sector that relies on the generosity of others, and Global Grassroots is no exception. However, these circumstances challenge us to become even more efficient and find more creative ways to sustain our support for our teams in Africa.

And our women aren't stopping. We have ten social projects in Rwanda currently awaiting funding to launch—three of which are water projects and five of which involve fighting violence against women. What we feel is most critical is that we do not fund a project until we are satisfied that the project team has built into its design creative methods for generating the revenue they need to sustain themselves. For example, we have one project which is teaching over 1200 illiterate women how to read, called "Invincible Vision 20/20". As a creative resourcing strategy, the team has encouraged local school children to collect rocks, broken bricks and firewood from the side of the road on their way to school. Many of their mothers are the ones learning to read at night in these same schools. After about 1-2 weeks, the team collects enough rocks, bricks and wood to sell a truckload to construction companies as building supplies, and the funds help pay their literacy teacher's salaries.

We are confident that as more people learn about Global Grassroots' work and the incredible potential these grassroots change agents have to transform their own communities with their own ideas, they will join us to help these women help themselves.

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

At Global Grassroots, we evaluate our success in developing conscious change agents as well as improving the wellbeing of marginalized women by the quality and sustainability of the social ventures our teams launch and their positive social impact. We are constantly fine-tuning our training and designing new offerings to improve effectiveness and meet new needs as we follow our teams' development. But the greatest measure of our success is the impact our chosen projects have in their own communities. Each project has built into their design social impact goals and evaluation metrics, and we monitor their progress and provide high-engagement advisory support for a minimum of twelve months. For example, one of our social ventures, called "Think About the Young Girls" is building same sex latrines for girls at schools to reduce the risk of rape and to encourage girls to stay in school after they reach the age of menstruation. Two of their objectives are to increase from 20 percent to 90 percent the number of girls who attend school during menstruation, and to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies by 70 percent after one year. We assist the teams in developing their baseline study and working with their target population to assess the issue and their progress over time. So our real measure of success at the end of the day is how many lives are touched.



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

My passion for social change goes back to when I was a child. When I was ten years old, I lived with my family in the Philippines, as my father, a Navy test pilot, was stationed there. At some point I found myself on a two week exchange program living with the family of a little Filipino girl in her rural fishing village.

I was terribly shy in those days, but even more terribly polite. I did what I thought I was supposed to do, and tried my best to smile through what was initially a terrifying experience. I took cold showers from a bucket and slept in a two room bamboo hut with at least a half dozen other family members. I went to school and marveled at how the children squeezed together to squint at the blackened piece of plywood that served as a chalk board, while sharing a few donated books. I also experienced incredible joy exploring the rain forest and playing with new friends in the ocean—with no toys, television or video games.

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When it was time for me to go, I realized how easily my life had quickly melded with what was one of the most loving, creative, united communities I had ever experienced. I had experienced deep poverty close up and yet I recognized how much happiness can exist without material prosperity. I knew that I had been born into an environment of privilege, and that somehow it came with responsibility, so I felt I had to work hard, learn as much as I could and then explore where I might be able to contribute in some way.

I studied international business in college, pursued international finance after school and eventually went back for an MBA—but my pursuit of business skills has always been a strategy to assemble the best set of tools I can to enable me to achieve the social change I hope to make in the world.

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