Humaneity Magazine | July 2010

Imagine that you live in rural Africa in a hut with no electricity. The only way to light your dwelling at night for your children to study is to burn kerosene. The kerosene lantern fills your home with toxic smoke that poisons the very air your children breathe and pollutes the environment. It is highly flammable and accidents are common. It is so expensive that it consumes one-third of your income, yet you have no alternative ... except living in darkness.

Many in wealthy countries are unaware that this is the daily reality for millions in impoverished countries. One Million Lights is a new organization that believes that a simple solution to the problem of clean rural lighting is within our grasp.

After visiting a school that my father had founded over 45 years ago in a remote village in Rajasthan, India, I came to understand the importance of safe, affordable light. Once the sun sets, the villagers work in the dim light of kerosene lamps, burning income that could be spent on essentials. Visions of children rubbing their eyes in the smoke, women walking for miles to purchase kerosene, and workers hunching over a flame, stayed with me.

I felt a profound desire to do something for those children. In 2004, I stumbled upon students at Stanford University, US, developing solar lanterns to replace kerosene lamps. It was the perfect solution, I thought, and I set a goal to acquire lights for children in that village. In 2008, I was fortunate to receive a donation from eBay (where I worked at the time) of 15,000 rechargeable lights, more than enough for the entire village. I returned to my father’s school with lights for each child.

A sad situation

It is a dilemma that the biggest users of kerosene are also the poorest. This community of 1.6 billion people is neither educated nor
able to make the switch to solar due to the existing high cost of lighting products that are commercially available. There are many socially-focused solar lighting companies today. Most of them, however, are functioning under the for-profit model and, as such, are stretched to serve this market successfully. While it is nearly impossible for a poor villager to afford a light for US$20 to US$50, it is an easy donation for an affluent individual.

One Million Lights’ philosophy is that empowering people at the bottom of the pyramid can result in significant systemic change, addressing many of the root problems of poverty. I have seen, firsthand, the impact on these families after they received a simple gift of a solar light. Their lives were transformed overnight, and so, I realized, was mine.

As I went about distributing lights to villages in India and Africa, I realized that the need is vast, issues of the environment are critical and urgent, and most importantly, that children are the same all over the world. I met Kombo, who is an orphan, and had to work to buy kerosene so that he could study at night; and Sarita, who was born in a lower caste and felt empowered to study after she received her solar light, or Geeta, who was going to give up her education because life was just too hard until she received her solar light. Growing up in India and through recent trips to rural areas of Peru, and Kenya, I have been able to sit down and have one-on-one conversations with rural families to understand their issues. I understand their need and can relate to it.

**Contributing experience & skills**

After 20+ years in the for-profit world of high technology, and most recently for five years at eBay, I have had the opportunity to learn many valuable business skills. I believe that running a non-profit is no different from running a regular
business. The only difference is in the mission and the passion behind it. One Million Lights was founded in July 2008. Since then I have resigned from my high-tech career to lead One Million Lights full-time. In addition, we have one full-time and several part-time employees, and an amazing and rapidly growing group of dedicated volunteers!

Within a year, we have grown One Million Lights into a fully functioning non-profit organization that is actively executing projects in 12 countries around the world including – India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Mozambique, Peru, Colombia and Cambodia. Our global distribution programs are gender-neutral, and targeted at people who are completely dependent on kerosene, are highly motivated to improve their lives, but cannot afford a solar light. Our programs are centered on schools, healthcare providers and village artisans.

We have recently begun our domestic component. We leverage university interns and families who, as a part of our ambassador program, visit the distributions and then share knowledge of the socio-economic and environmental impact of our distributions with local school children here in the US. This piece of our program is important, in that we are ensuring that our children are better equipped to understand global sustainability, socio-economic and cultural issues.

We believe that if you really want to change the world – you can.

Anna Sidana is the founder and CEO of One Million Lights at www.onemillionlights.org. She has spent over 20 years in the highly competitive world of high technology with careers ranging from marketing to business management, with the most recent five years at eBay Inc. Before joining eBay, Sidana was vice-president of marketing at Callixa Corp and eTime Capital. Prior to that, she held management positions at Netscape, Visa International, Ernst & Young and IBM.