A Bay Area-based nonprofit seeks to light up the darkest corners of our world and effect change we can all see.

TEXT BY LENA DAKESSIAN

I imagine darkness. Really, close your eyes and feel the absence of light. Now, imagine the quality of your day, knowing that when the sun goes down, you’ll have to make do with the toxic carbon emissions of a kerosene lamp and a pair of strained eyes. I imagine children not being able to read and write, or women having to birth their infants into darkness, because light, a fundamental need in this our human existence, is not at their disposal.

While this may not be our reality, it’s pretty real for the some 1.6 billion children and adults living in darkness across the globe. Now imagine being able to give people light—to actually place it in their hands, and with this gift restore a community’s chance for a better life, a child’s ability to excel. Anna Sidana did imagine this, and quite vividly. Anna is a philanthropic wonder— one of the most inspired and influential humanitarians of our time. She is the full-time volunteer, founder, and CEO of One Million Lights, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with an ambitious starting goal: to distribute one million rechargeable solar lamps to some of the world’s most impoverished rural communities within the next eight years.
Sitting on Anna’s couch in her cozy Palo Alto home, one can’t help but scan the walls of her living room. Striking abstract paintings take most of your attention. “These are mine. I painted them,” she says humbly. Not long into our conversation, I realize Anna really gives meaning to the term “global citizen,” concerned, and very in tune with the way in which all beings are connected. She is known to think big and implement in specific ways. And as Anna and I sit comfortably, cups of tea in hand, she begins to tell me just how she “thought big.” Thought millions actually, with One Million Lights.

Anna was born in New Delhi, India, and enjoyed “a pretty great life.” While good schooling was at the forefront of her privileges, her childhood was filled with privileges, children living in the nearby state of Rajasthan, where Anna’s father owned a farm, couldn’t say the same. Living amidst a poor rural community, these families of Rajasthan had no access to a basic infrastructure, much less a school. While Anna’s parents spent time running the farm, she’d have fun playing with local villagers, some-thing, she notes, that helped establish her connections with rural communities at an early age. For a little while she became immersed in their life. “When my parents realized there was no school by the farm, my father decided to start one, with all of five kids,” little did Anna know that her father’s project would, years later, jump-start her own philanthropic endeavors and her mission to “lighten lives and minds” all over the world. “I truly believe that light is as funda-mental as food, water, and shelter,” she says.

Five years ago, Anna’s family visited to this same school in Rajasthan (now boasting 250 kids) became the catalyst for her call to action. She began looking into different partnerships, picking up tips on how to start a nonprofit. She championed this problem of lighting, and how it is so essential to life. “Kids are the same every-where,” says Anna. “They need the same things.” It’s quite simple. Education is key to success. An education cannot be maintained without study. Primary study time takes place after hours, when children have completed their intensive daily chores. And, well, study can’t exactly take place after sunset without light.

In 2008, Anna’s efforts paid off. She received her first major grant from Bay Area school students through their local school program, which donors are able to give the gift of light first-hand, learning about the recipients’ lifestyle and culture. It’s all experiential.

As of today, One Million Lights has made distributions in 18 countries, aiding communities in South America, Asia, and Africa. “Our global distribution programs are gender neutral,” she explains. “They target people who are completely dependent on kerosene and are highly motivated to improve their lives but cannot afford a solar light.”

The first step for any of these recipients is to reconcile with herself at one point and ask, “Am I doing the right thing?” We live in a world of hyper-consumerism and gad-getry, while the people living in these villages have a certain con-tentment that we lack.” Ultimately, Anna realized that her global mission was not an interference. Rather, there exists a dire need for a solution to problems people should not be coping with in this day and age. And their response to help has been overwhelming. “Our recipients are beyond appreciative. But it’s also imperative for us to help foster a sense of mutual respect. Free has no value. Even a nominal fee or in-kind gesture is important to create value for our recipients. The lamps, in turn, become less of a handout.”

Developing partnerships with universities, NGOs, and solar lighting companies, in addition to advocating community involve-ment is key to One Million Lights’ growing success. With an active volunteer base from universities like Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and UC Berkeley, the organization has sparked a passion in stu-dents to break through the cycle of poverty. The Global Ambassador program puts into effect a “donor-meets-recipients” model in which donors are able to give the gift of light first-hand, learning about the recipients’ lifestyle and culture. It’s all experiential.

Likewise, One Million Lights encourages active participation from Bay Area school students through their local school program, aimed towards raising awareness and empathy for those in need. Anna describes her visit to one of the local elementary schools where she sits down with a group of eight-year-olds to teach them about the importance of lighting. “We asked kids to spend two hours in darkness at home and to jot down a response to the experience. The kids wrote some heartfelt letters about why it’s important to raise money for our cause. It was amazing how the experience motivated them as a school.”

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