

Social Action Gets Personal

By Leah Friedman '02

I live on Facebook. Say about that what you will, but I'm hardly alone. Head to the Emma Willard School Alums group and you'll find over 700 graduates who've gathered there.

"But what's it for?" my mom has asked me half a dozen times. I've never been able to take the easy way out and say it's for professional networking. I'd stumble over explanations. "It's for procrastination." "It's for snarky stalking." "It's to connect with my fellow crypto-hipster indie music fans."

So it was a relief to head up to the Women, Power, and Possibility symposium sponsored by my alma mater on Reunion Weekend and discover that social networking has the ability to do more than simply put more sarcasm into the cyber-ether. Emma Willard, always on the lookout for the teachable moment, gathered together seven women who had managed to turn the often-acidic environment online into a force for one-on-one outreach. Each had taken a personal desire to help others and turned it into a viable, vibrant organization. And each had found a means to use the Web in order to further her own cause.

For instance, Sierra Murdoch '05, a senior at Middlebury College, believes that climate change is the issue of her generation. So, among numerous other environmental actions, she cofounded 350.org, where browsers can easily "Take Action" on her organization's Web site by choosing among a myriad of programs that allow the individual user to organize events at the local level to educate about climate change. Or the organization founded by Neelam Mehta '93, Click-Aid, allows businesses to donate unwanted computer technology to underdeveloped nations.

Kiva.org, cofounded by Jessica Jackley Flannery, perhaps exemplifies this best. Kiva.org, billed as the world's first person-to-person micro-lending Web site, lets people like you and me read about specific entrepreneurs in the developing world who need funds to start a business or buy business-related items. Browsers can then loan—not donate—money in whatever amount they choose. This is called microfinancing and it's an important new movement in the world of philanthropy. Microfinancing allows individuals in developing nations to take out loans of a few hundred to a few thousand dollars in order to fund what will ultimately become self-sustaining business initiatives.

What is extraordinary about Flannery's organization (and, it became clear, about each of the organizations founded by the other six women) is that power is no longer necessarily solely in the hands of the millionaire philanthropist.



Ashley Shuyler, of *AfricAid*, and Lindsay Hyde, of *Strong Women, Strong Girls*.

In every case, a program exists to empower individuals to empower other individuals. “We don’t so much train as enable,” explained Lindsay Hyde, founder of Strong Women, Strong Girls. Power and possibility are nearly synonymous when individuals are given the correct tools.

I, like those alums I encountered from the Class of 2003 there for their fifth reunion, and like the students currently enrolled at EWS, grew up in the age of Facebook. The question of whether that makes us the most isolated or the most hyperconnected generation I’ll leave up to the dot-com philosophers. But what this symposium made clear is that something new is happening online.

It’s as though someone took our beloved Facebook and turned it into a force for good and not just the greatest time-waster in the history of technology. These seven women helped build programs that, ultimately, allow you to connect to those you are helping or those things you are helping to change. It’s as though, in the era of the 12-hour news cycle and My Super Sweet 16, we’ve been given a reason to pay attention to something. Why? Because instead of passively donating, the new philanthropists are realizing what can be accomplished by one person being put in contact with others through nonprofit networking.

Ultimately, what must drive these evolving organizations is the knowledge that the users can actually see what effects their contributions have on individuals. The 21st-century version of philanthropy offers more than the promise of a tax deduction. Case in point, those who benefit from Kiva.org will post journals discussing how they’re using the money. In fact, several of the women talked about how it was this sort of personal touch that prompted them to go into nonprofit work.


What was certainly apparent was the degree to which the concept of social networking has facilitated these programs. Consider Kiva.org, or the grassroots campaign section of the Web site for The Polaris Project, Katherine Chon’s anti-sex-trafficking group. There’s the collaborative nature of both Strong Women, Strong Girls and AfricAid (women empowering women). Click-Aid’s function is to provide other organizations the means to allow effective reuse of their technology.

In the Running raises the profile of seven smaller organizations that need the coverage.

In 2006, *Time* magazine determined “You” to be the Person of the Year. It was mostly considered a cop-out. Ridiculous, even! But maybe the editors weren’t so far off. Take away the narcissistic and somewhat navel-gazing aspect of social networking and you have the


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basis for Women, Power, and Possibility. The individual has power. The individual creates possibility.

Perhaps that was the teachable moment—the idea that to Do Good, you don’t have to act on a global scale. Instead, do what makes sense to your heart. Or, as Ms. Flannery said, “Don’t be afraid to be scrappy.” 

Leah Friedman is based in Philadelphia and works as an international reporter for TV Guide and tvguide.com.

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 See a video of the symposium and read more about the speakers at: www.emmawillard.org/symposium