

The Fire Behind The Brand: Firelight Founder Kerry Olson, From Grassroots To Public
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At seven years old, Kerry Olson was organizing fundraiser fairs in her backyard for humanitarian organizations complete with ring tosses and stuffed animal prizes. Today, she's the vibrant, passionate founder of Firelight Foundation, an organization based in Santa Cruz, California supporting children and communities impacted by HIV/AIDS and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.

After decades of leading a professional life centered around children and education, Olson launched Firelight in 1999 with her husband David Katz, a software engineer in Silicon Valley. Firelight quickly became known as an effective grantmaker making small grants to community-based organizations in sub-Saharan Africa that work to improve the overall welfare of the families and children. Firelight's unique, carefully planned approach ensures that each dollar goes directly to the local organizations that are addressing needs within their communities. Over the past decade, Firelight has awarded more than 1,000 grants, totaling roughly \$12 million dollars, to over two hundred grantee partners in ten African countries.

In 2007, Olson and Katz were recognized for their work as Firelight's founders by Dow Jones Barron's Magazine in a feature article on ten "Wise Givers" who "epitomize thoughtful and effective" philanthropy. Operating for its first ten years as a private nonprofit foundation, Firelight recently became a public charity in response to increasing levels of public recognition and support. Firelight has attracted corporate sponsors, namely Elton John AIDS Foundation and Nike Foundation, who share the philosophy that giving at the grassroots level is the best method to promote positive change.

Just stepping into Firelight's main office, one can feel the integrity and dedication behind the organization; figurines and vibrant artwork adorn the shelves and photos of smiling children line the walls. "I'm a frustrated artist," Olson laughs. "Seriously though, I believe that our work and living spaces should reflect our values and intentions. If we can work in a space that reminds us of what it's all about, this nurtures our sense of purpose and beauty and enhances our work."

What is a non-profit targeting children and communities in sub-Saharan Africa doing in Santa Cruz?! What was the inspiration behind starting it? Why Africa?

My husband and I started Firelight Foundation the very end of 1999. We were beneficiaries of the Silicon Valley boom. Dave worked, and still works in the industry as a software engineer. When the company he worked for went public, we found ourselves in a position of unexpected wealth and felt strongly about giving back and doing something that we could feel really good about.

When I looked at the issues impacting children, Africa, sub-Saharan Africa in particular, called out to me. Not only is it the epicenter of the AIDS pandemic, but also an area of extreme poverty. There are a lot of people living on the equivalent of one or two U.S. dollars a day. When we launched Firelight in 1999, eleven million children had been orphaned by AIDS and nearly forty million orphaned altogether from different causes. This was mind boggling to me. And the more I learned, the more my heart broke, and the more I wanted to find a way to do something to make a difference.

The good news is that there are thousands of community organizations that are the local response to the crisis and that a little money can go a long way when it actually makes it to the ground level. I learned that about ninety percent of the response to children and families impacted by AIDS and poverty comes from their local community-local groups, churches, community members taking action in the face of the crisis right at their doorsteps. That level of the community, which is so vital to the response, is really under-resourced. And there, the dollar hits the ground running.

I'm getting a little ahead of myself here though, because when I first started Firelight it did still occur to me that it might not be a realistic idea. I had never been to Africa and I lived in Santa Cruz, California. How was this vision of helping children in Africa ever going to get off the ground? But the desire and intention were there and a number of things happened that paved the way forward. I was invited to attend the UN conference on children orphaned by AIDS in 1999. I heard several speakers who were leaders of community organizations in Africa. They gave me a different vision of the work that was already going on. I was blown away with their courage and their passion.

I also met Sandra Thurman, who was then the Director of AIDS Policy with the Clinton Administration. I flew to Washington DC, met with her and just said, "We're starting a family foundation, and really want to address this issue of AIDS and the impact on children in sub-Saharan Africa. Is this a crazy idea?" And she said, "No, there's really a need for every level of engagement." That was very encouraging. Then I went to Council on Foundations, the main office in DC, and met with their international grantmaking people and their family foundation people, who were also really supportive.

I made "cold-calls" to organizations I found on the internet, groups focused on children orphaned and affected by AIDS and on grassroots grantmaking. I read everything I could get my hands on and asked a lot of questions. Again and again, the right people kept coming forward at the right time. It really seemed meant to be, even if our goals were far reaching. So we went for it, set the mission and went to work.

The International AIDS Conference, which happens only once every two years, was in Durban, South Africa, that year, 2000. It brought together thousands of people from around the continent who were doing work in communities. I couldn't go because of my health, which was very hard. But a very dedicated Firelight volunteer, Tammy Moody, as well as one of our first advisory board members, Suzi Peel, were able to go. They met people at the conference, went to five countries, and visited a lot of programs on behalf of Firelight. Out

of that came our first round of proposals. In the fall of 2000, we awarded over \$350,000 in grants to local, community-based organizations.

You mentioned that you had never been to Africa prior to starting Firelight. Do you go there often now?

No. I've had one trip to South Africa. I can't go to many areas of Africa because of chronic health issues that make that kind of travel difficult. I had been really sick and on disability before starting Firelight and still have to be careful. It's hard not to be able to go and see the work of our grantee partners. Our staff goes on regular site visits though. In the early years, I was operating more as part of the staff, reading every proposal and really learning a lot about the work in that way, but always having to consider the risk if I went and ended up really sick. I realized that I could serve the foundation best by working closer to home and maintaining my strength. This was a hard but important lesson.

If you're interested in a cause or an issue, it's important to be informed and learn the context, but there are many ways to do that. I've met a number of our grantee partners when we've hosted gatherings at Firelight or during conferences and I am always grateful for this and come away inspired. I've also learned a lot from our advisory board, our staff. My heart was really drawn to Africa, and I learned through people and connecting, but not going there is a loss for me.

On the other hand, I really feel strongly that philanthropy is ultimately not about the "me." A lot of the time, we want to give to things where we can be personally connected in a direct way. And it's important to understand what we're giving to and get behind the ethics. But sometimes our need to be recognized or to be directly involved can get in the way of good philanthropy. I guess it comes down to looking at the big picture, beyond our personal motivations, and asking how we can bring the most value to our giving.

When it comes to helping children affected by AIDS and poverty in Africa, I know that there are lots of adults in their own communities who see these children everyday and who can be there for them in a real way. One of the best ways to support these kids is to support the local organizations that help the families and communities they live in to meet their needs. I don't need to go there to do that.

To me, the real heroes are the people that are doing the work on the ground. We don't hear their stories often enough, we don't see the amazing work they're doing. It really is a partnership. They're giving me an opportunity to take excess resources that could be much better used and turn them into something that makes a difference in children's lives. The purity of your motivations is remarkable.

It just makes sense. I used to do community work, and I used to have to ask for funds. When you're working on the front line, there's an urgency and an integrity to what you do that often is not appreciated by funders in the same way. There can be a power dynamic that's really hard.

We want the value of resilience, of our grantee's strengths, and of respectful partnership to come across in our materials. This isn't a charity model of "we are the givers" and "here are the recipients." Firelight addresses a social justice issue because there's a real imbalance in resources and people are locally bringing what they can to it. We can come alongside and help these efforts go so much further with the infusion and the investment of funds.

It's not just about money, and in fact when we talk to our grantee partners, often they'll say, "what we really also like is that you treat us with respect." To have an outside funder come in and say, "we really want to hear what you think the solutions are, what are you doing, what are your priorities?" is tremendous for some of these groups to feel seen and appreciated.

From the beginning, the core philosophy of Firelight is based on respect for local leadership and local ownership. The best and most long-lasting solutions come about when community members themselves are invested and taking action. It's always preferable than an outsider coming in saying, "I think you need to do this, and I will only fund that." What we've ended up funding actually are the priorities of the communities. It's amazing that you get as much done as you do with a staff of ten. Just briefly, how has Firelight evolved over the years?

Our core mission, vision and values have remained the same, but as an organization we have definitely evolved. My role has changed too, from being more "hands on" with programming, to being more focused on outreach and advocacy. It really has been an amazing journey.

When we first started, we didn't have any paid staff. We got our initial round of grants out the door with just an advisory board, Tammy Moody, and myself. This was not a sustainable model in the long-term though. It takes a full-time team to do the kind of grassroots grantmaking that Firelight does. Within our first three years, we had hired an administrative assistant, a Director and two program officers. We have added to staff as our work has grown.

The story of Firelight has really been a story of the right people coming on board at the right time. From the beginning, our advisory board brought a breadth and depth of knowledge that guided our work. Our first director, Jennifer Astone, had been on our advisory board so we knew that she shared Firelight's values and that she also brought a strong background in working with community groups in Africa. Jennifer served through 2007 and was instrumental in helping to build the programs up at Firelight. Our current Executive Director, Peter Laugharn, has helped us move to the next level. We knew Peter when he was the Executive Director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation - one of the largest early childhood funders in the world - and we are incredibly fortunate to have him take this leadership role. Our Program Director, Zanele Sibanda-Knight, was born and raised in Zimbabwe and she brings such a great understanding and energy to her work. It's great to be working with people who are so passionate about making a difference for children.

When I first started Firelight, I thought, "I just want to get funds to groups doing good work-to find those groups and not get in their way." But what we found was that groups also value engagement. It's not just about the money. It's about partnership. Our grantee partners want to be able to communicate their challenges and issues, to build on their work in meaningful ways and to connect with other groups so that they can share and learn from one another. The groups we fund take capacity building very seriously. The challenges they face are complex and the local need is so great.

So in addition to providing needed funds, Firelight also supports groups in their efforts to learn and to grow their programs. We provide funding and resources for technical support, for groups to come together, for exchange visits. We also have a weekly newsletter that provides a forum for groups to share their work, and to find out about new resources and funding opportunities. Our program staff oversees all of this. So support for capacity building, in addition to our core work in grantmaking, has evolved as a program. Firelight started as a private foundation. Why did you become a public charity?

When we started Firelight, I had no idea or plan to raise funds to support our work. We were a private foundation with an endowment. We just wanted to do some good with the resources we had. But then we began receiving unsolicited donations, at first from individuals and businesses Dave and I knew personally. As people learned about what we were doing, they wanted to be a part of it. And we realized, we should open this up. We have a model and a mechanism for getting resources to where they are truly needed, at the ground level in Africa where every dollar counts and this is no small thing.

As our reputation as a grassroots grantmaker grew, we also began receiving invitations to submit proposals to corporate and other institutional funders. We have now gotten to the point where most of our support comes from public sources. This was the reason why we made the decision to become a public charity. It brings us into alignment with the organization we have grown to become. And hopefully this will open doors for more support from a wider range of sources.

Over the years, we've had support from a variety of groups and people. One of the things that's touched me most is the way that children and youth have taken an interest in our work. Kids have had bake sales, raised awareness and funds in their schools...One amazing young woman, Julia Feinberg, who is living with spinal muscular atrophy was awarded \$7,000 from Make-A-Wish Foundation and her wish was to give it to Firelight!

So many people today are focused on scarcity and the economic crisis and it has this paralyzing kind of effect. So many youth are disgusted and discouraged with the state of the world and it leads to a kind of apathy. I believe that one of the best antidotes to this is to find a cause that you care enough about to take action on and to give.

I'm excited about what public charity status can mean for Firelight. If anyone had told me when we started that this would be where Firelight would be today, I would not have believed it. On the other hand, there was always the hope that it would grow into something bigger, something that would really inspire and engage others. The heart of

Firelight is about communities making a difference for children: communities in Africa mobilizing action and local resources, communities here investing in these groups. What about your communications and branding of this organization? Can you talk about that process?

We saw early on that we had an opportunity to share the amazing work that's going on at the community level in Africa. We want to build a bridge between people here and the issues on the ground in Africa. And this is a very real need because so many people here in the U.S. identify Africa with its struggles and not with its strengths. So many people see Africa as a "lost cause" when in fact there's tremendous reason for hope and great opportunities to make a difference.

Firelight launched its website in early 2001 and has built on its communications ever since. From the beginning, we wanted to show images of children that really communicated their resilience, not "here's the child looking like a victim or just a recipient of services." The need is a reality, but we really wanted to show that children are the future; when they're given the opportunity, they can rise above very, very difficult circumstances. Moses Zulu, one of the many grassroots leaders Firelight has worked with, said it very well - that "given half a chance, there is a hero in every child."

We do a lot of outreach. Not only through our website and annual report, but through dialogue and interaction. The staff and I engage with different national and international groups and forums to share our approach and what we are learning about working with community organizations and the difference these groups are making for children and families. We speak at conferences and engage with other foundations. I'm also very involved in outreach with the faith-based community here in the U.S.

Our Director of Communications, Suzana Grego, led us through a great rebranding process that highlights our "child-centered, family-focused, and community-based approach. Firelight recently launched a blog "Ubuntu" which in Bantu languages means "My well-being is connected to your well-being." The stories on this blog really bring home the work of Firelight and our partners

I really believe that one of the best ways that we can increase our impact is through sharing our story and the stories of our grantee partners. It's great when Firelight receives a donation from an individual or organization that believes in this work. It's also great when an individual or organization is inspired by what we are doing, by what our partners on the ground in Africa are doing, to create their own initiative or path to getting involved. Our outreach is to inform and to inspire, as well as to raise funds.

Have you modeled yourself after anyone? Was there someone who mentored you?

That's a tough question. I've had teachers and educators that were especially inspiring through the years, most importantly George and Annemarie Roeper who were the founders of Roeper School in Michigan, where I went to high school. They actively supported my interest in education and social causes, reading my papers, discussing ideas, and encouraging the path I was on. I earned half my tuition at Roeper by working with

preschoolers and received school credit for my anti-war activities - this was in the early '70's - and for starting a "school within a school." I dedicated my doctoral dissertation to George and Annemarie. They were real inspirations in their dedication to social activism and to education as a path to building a better future. I guess I'd have to say they stand out as mentors in my early years. I left Roeper knowing that I wanted to work for and with children.

More recently, I have learned a lot from our staff, our advisory board and our grantee partners. Our advisory board meetings are highlights for me because it is a concentrated period of a few days of active discussion and learning. It's a stellar group in terms of their depth and breadth of understanding. They're all Africa-based and really know the issues, but they're also individuals who have a lot of recognition more broadly. Many of them have done research and work for much larger organizations, so for them to serve on Firelight's advisory board has been really wonderful for us. They really believe in Firelight's work and approach. And to learn from them has been incredible.

A lot of the organizations Firelight funds include a focus on education. Can you tell us more about this? Is this because of your own background as an educator?

I definitely think education is key. Education is a priority for many of our grantee partners as well and we see this reflected in the proposals we receive. I should stress though that we do not dictate the programs that we will fund. Firelight funds the priorities set by the organizations themselves. It's an approach based on respect for community initiative and the power of local solutions to local problems, rather than a "project- or donor-driven" approach." The greatest asset these organizations have is their own initiative and investment in the work they are doing and we want to respect that.

What the research has shown now over the years is that it's actually the programs that are started within the community and owned by the community that survive the test of time even when donor dollars dry up. So when we get proposals, we look very carefully for community ownership, community leadership, and what resources the communities themselves are bringing. We look at what they are saying and seeing in terms of the needs of the children and what they are doing to meet these needs.

That said, very often the first step community members take in organizing around helping children is to work to ensure kids stay in school. Children leave school for many reasons and it puts their futures at risk. Parents ill with AIDS can no longer work, family resources are used up on whatever medical care or help they can access, and the result is that no money is left for school fees. Often the eldest daughter drops out of school to help care for the ailing parent and the younger siblings.

One pattern we've seen is that education is a stepping stone to more comprehensive programs. The groups we fund may start with education, paying school fees for example, or with providing home-based care for an ill parent so that children can return to school. They start with one area that's a critical need, mobilizing what local resources they can to address the issue. As they continue to organize and get further involved they build on their work and begin to take a more holistic approach. So the community response transforms

around and beyond this issue. They realize they can keep kids in school, but then they also need to be addressing things like psychosocial support and making sure that when they're at school these children have something to eat, otherwise they can't learn.

We're investing in the future when we invest in children's well-being, be it their education, their psychological well-being or physical health, their own leadership skills as they mature, and their sense of efficacy as people in their communities and the world. We see all of these areas being addressed across the groups we fund. We fund other critical needs as well, like providing income-generating activities for caregivers so that they can provide for their children...helping youth learn vocational and AIDS-prevention skills and providing material assistance to elderly grandparents caring for children who have been orphaned...The beauty of this is that we do not have a single programmatic focus, but that we see a real range of programs that are customized by grassroots organizations to their local needs and situation.

What is your vision for the future?

At the macro level, my vision is really Firelight's vision statement, beginning with every child being raised in a supportive family and community, protected from abuse, with their basic needs for food, shelter, healthcare, and education being met. This is ultimately what we work towards, to do our part towards making the world a better place for children who struggle to grow up in really difficult circumstances, one community at a time.

My hope is that more individuals, groups, and organizations here in the U.S. will take an active interest in what is going on in Africa, become more aware of the level of need, as well as the opportunity to make a real difference. That they will see that even in the midst of our own economic struggles, this is an area where a little can go a long way. That they will recognize the value in supporting children who face challenges that we can barely begin to imagine.

Back in 1999 when Firelight was a seed of an idea, I remember thinking about the immensity of the problem we were seeking to address. There was a pull towards giving up before I even started, this sense of, "How can we even hope to make a difference in the face of something as huge as millions of children orphaned and affected by HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa?" And then there was something else. Kind of a still small voice. It was a steady source of encouragement, that together with the external pieces coming together (like the right people coming along at the right time) kept reminding me that we all need to start somewhere. So what if our efforts add up to the proverbial drop in the bucket? Never underestimate the ripple effect, or the fact that enough drops actually lead to a full bucket!

So here we are more than ten years later. Firelight had made over a thousand grants and we currently have over two hundred active grantee partners. Many of these organizations had never received external funds prior to working with Firelight. Thousands of children are being served through these programs. Building on this work going forward...This is my hope as Firelight celebrates its 10th anniversary and its new status as a public charity.

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