

# Everyone a Changemaker

• Diana Wells  
• Roshan Paul  
• Ashoka

**M**ark Hanis grew up as the grandchild of four Holocaust survivors. Living and working in Ecuador, Sierra Leone and New York City, he came to acutely experience how we so often “otherize” and alienate those who are not like us. He also saw how the lessons of the Holocaust had not been learned—we’ve allowed genocide to happen again and again despite the world’s “Never Again” pledge after World War II.

As a senior at Swarthmore College, he was disturbed that there weren’t any events planned to mark the tenth year of the Rwandan genocide. So Mark went about organizing a commemoration event, which turned out to be a success. From that modest beginning, Mark, along with his colleagues, has gone on to build one of the foremost and most innovative anti-genocide organizations in the world, the Genocide Intervention Network (GI-NET). One of the cornerstones of GI-NET’s approach has been the realization that the world’s failure to stop genocide was due not to lack of awareness so much as to lack of political will. The best way to galvanize this was to ensure there were effective ways for citizens to take political action. So GI-NET created effective new techniques for enabling citizens to communicate their opposition to genocide. For instance, they came up with the first-ever anti-genocide hotline that connects callers directly to their elected officials for free, provides talking

Mark Hanis has built one of the foremost and most innovative anti-genocide organizations in the world: the Genocide Intervention Network (GI-NET). He is 28 years old.



Photo courtesy Sean Beethaupt and Yvette Monahan, Ashoka

Members of the Ashoka Globalizer community are focused on spreading social impact.

## What is a Social Entrepreneur?

- An individual with **innovative solutions** to society’s most pressing social problems.
- Ambitious and persistent, **endlessly creative** in coming up with solutions to daily obstacles and frustrations
- Possessed by an idea that they are convinced can **change the world**. Determined to work on making this idea successful for as long as it takes.

points related to current legislation, suggests other actions elected officials can take to help end genocide and even enables citizens to listen to genocide discussions taking place in Congress. GI-NET also leverages the idealism, energy and tech savviness of youth; there are over 800 anti-genocide chapters in high schools and colleges across America. Mark will soon be transitioning out of a full-time staff role and onto the board of the organization in search of his next big idea. He is 28 years old.

What makes Mark a social entrepreneur? Of all the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors who went to college in America, why was it he that went on to become president of the world’s largest organization dedicated to preventing genocide a mere six years after graduating? At Ashoka, we’ve elected nearly 3,000 such people as Fellows from over 65 countries, and we see the same qualities shine brightly within each of them. They are possessed by an idea they are convinced can change the world, they are determined to work on making this idea successful for as long as it takes, they are endlessly creative in coming up with solutions to daily

obstacles and frustrations, and they possess a strong ethical streak that makes people, society, instinctively trust them. These leaders, or social entrepreneurs, are changing the world.

But alone, even they are not enough. We live in a world where problems seem to be breeding faster than we can count them. Our economy is being transformed, painfully so for millions of Americans. Climate change continues to loom over our heads. The gap between the richest and the poor widens every year. The House and Senate seem to be caught in a perpetual cycle of implacable hostility between both major parties. What is the solution to this juggernaut of multiplying problems?

**We need a world where every individual is a changemaker.**

We need to create a world that multiplies changemakers who can attack these problems, or prevent them from happening in the first place. By this, we don’t mean that everyone should turn off their lights when they leave a room, though that is of course important, and we should.

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Go to dream  
to get there  
Photo courtesy of Echoing Green

**We need to enable individuals to feel like they have the confidence, creativity, and empathy to address the problems they see around them.**



The Ashoka Changemaker Campus Fellows.

By this, we mean that we need to enable individuals to feel like they have the confidence, creativity and empathy to address the problems they see around them, whether it is to create a conflict resolution process in the family or a neighborhood recycling program or prevent the sale of toxic mortgages.

And here's the good news: The world will conspire to let you be a changemaker. If you are a young person, there have never been as many opportunities or resources to help you come up with a plan to solve a problem and walk you through implementing this plan. If you are a college student, look around you: Is your campus joining the Changemaker Campus movement? If you are a business owner, you should know that the levels of collaboration between companies and citizen groups have never been as high as they are today (and are only getting higher). Companies are partnering with citizen sector organizations to extend their reach to underserved populations with products that are essential and affordable. If you are a budding social entrepreneur, there is a plethora of start-up funding organizations waiting to help you.

We could go on. But we'd rather show you some more people who are walking this path. At Ashoka, we work with many of America's best social entrepreneurs: Wendy Kopp who founded Teach for America, Jimmy Wales who founded Wikipedia, J.B. Schramm of College Summit and over a hundred more. Yet, to truly illustrate the point that everyone can be a changemaker, let us tell you two stories of youth who are transforming the world we live in.

First, let's meet Heather Wilder, 17 years old, from Las Vegas. She is a passionate advocate for the rights of foster care children in the United States, with a clarity of conviction that can only come from having lived the experience herself. Heather was removed from an abusive situation as a young child. After several years in the foster care system, she was adopted into a loving and supportive family at age 12. To help foster kids who are still in the system, Heather wrote a series of booklets that address issues faced by foster children on a daily basis, like moving homes frequently, not being adopted or dealing with previous and sometimes ongoing abusive situations. Today, social workers give Heather's booklets to children as they come into the foster care system. She acknowledges that it can be difficult to speak up about the abuse she endured, but she's driven by her determination to be a voice for other children who haven't left the system: "Being brave helps me feel better, because I pretend that I am being brave for someone else who can't share their stories yet."

And now let's meet Talia. Fifteen years old, Talia is the CEO and a founder of RandomKid, a nonprofit organization that leverages the power of youth to solve real problems in the world. To date she has leveraged the power of 12 million youth from 20 countries to bring aid on four continents, ranking the giving power of youth with the top US corporations. Talia is the winner of numerous national and international awards for her philanthropic work—including World of Children's Founder Youth Award, which is considered to be the Nobel prize for efforts that serve the world's children. Nicholas Kristof wrote of Talia in his column in the New

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Photo courtesy Talia Lemman, RandomKid

*York Times*: "If your image of a philanthropist is a stout, gray geezer, then meet Talia Lemman, an eighth grader in Iowa who loves soccer and swimming, and whose favorite subject is science. I'm supporting her for president in 2044." Talia travels across the world speaking about "The Power of ANYone."

This is what a world in which everyone is a changemaker can look like. A world where people who grew up with the memories of the Holocaust can design solutions for those affected by other genocides in far-away lands because we pledged that this would never happen again, where children who have had disturbed childhoods come up with concrete solutions so that those that follow them don't have to suffer the same experiences, and where someone with a bright idea can have a global impact before her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.

President Obama's creation of the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation is an important, proactive step. It is an attempt to harness the power of innovation and entrepreneurship to drive systems-changing solutions to our nation's most pressing problems. This shows that the administration recognizes something that many do not. It is not simply about

building institutions, but more important, it is about creating an enabling environment—one that surfaces a variety of innovative solutions and helps them spread. With the ever-increasing rate of change around us, it is now more critical than ever to ensure more individuals are mastering the skills of empathy, teamwork and leadership to be effective changemakers. The only answer to more problems is more problem-solvers. For this reason, we believe the only answer is to build a world where all citizens are playing roles to solve the world's most pressing needs—an *Everyone a Changemaker* world.

When you see the front page of the newspaper or switch on cable news, this world may seem a very long way away. And it is. We do have a long way to go. But every day there are events unfolding that are reshaping the very contours of our world. We know so many other Marks and Talias and Heathers, and together they prove, incontrovertibly and emphatically, the power of the individual to change the world. We're excited about our future.

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*Diana Wells first joined Ashoka ([www.ashoka.org](http://www.ashoka.org)) in the 1980s after graduating from Brown University. She completed a PhD in anthropology from New York University as a Fulbright and Woodrow Wilson scholar. Post-PhD, Wells returned to Ashoka to provide leadership for Ashoka's process of finding and supporting the world's leading social entrepreneurs, including managing Ashoka's geographic and portfolio growth. Wells was named president of Ashoka in November of 2005. She is on the advisory board for Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship (CASE) at Duke's Fuqua School of Business, and has taught anthropology and development at Georgetown University.*



*Roshan Paul has been involved in creating several new Ashoka programs, most recently Ashoka Peace (launching entrepreneurs in conflict zones) and Ashoka Globalizer (helping social entrepreneurs accelerate their impact globally). He has also managed Ashoka's Fellow Security and Senior Fellows programs. In an earlier stint, he co-launched Ashoka's Youth Venture program in India. Paul has degrees from Davidson College and the Harvard Kennedy School, and currently serves on the advisory boards of Lifting Voices, TechChange and Peace Direct US. He juggles passions for social entrepreneurship in conflict-stricken areas, and for the use of storytelling as a critical leadership skill.*

