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PAOLO VESCIA

# Entrepreneurs balance profit, social good

## Women start companies with eye to doing good

BY ROBIN EVANS

San Francisco Business Times Contributor

Cynthia Ringo of San Francisco’s DBL Investors has noticed that women entrepreneurs often tend to be do-gooders.

Ringo co-manages a \$75 million venture capital fund that invests in enterprises that partner locally to improve the economic, social and environmental conditions in the city’s low- to moderate-income neighborhoods.

“When you’re talking with female entrepreneurs, many have the social or environmental aspect to their business built in from the beginning,” said Ringo.

“We’re not saying men don’t have these same drives or culture, but for many more women this is an integral part of what their mission is,” said Ringo, who manages the fund with Nancy Pfund. “They go at it in a way that incorporates a whole lot more than traditional metrics on a balance sheet.”

Indeed, women entrepreneurs — particularly those in the Bay Area — are at the forefront of creating socially responsible businesses. They are harnessing their unique skills, life experiences and personal values to create opportunities for themselves that also bring new ideals of environmental stewardship, health and safety and political and social responsibility to the industries in which they operate.

Ringo said when women start businesses, they often bring an innate mindfulness for the well-being of others, for the world, for the kind of world their children will grow up in.

Shawn Zelman, senior director of NAWBO, says there are no statistics on how many women businesses are focused on environmentally or socially conscious enterprises.

However, Sharon Hadary, executive director of the Center for Womens’ Business Research, said women’s desire to incorporate social or environmental responsibilities into their business models is part of a trend her organization saw in the mid-1990s. Studies then found that women business owners were engaged early in the

green movement, purchasing sustainable products for their businesses and in their personal lives and were more concerned than men about giving back.

“What we saw then was just the tip of the iceberg. We’ve seen an acceleration of this, so much so that we’ve just coined a phrase for it — connected capitalism,” she said. “Women start out with the idea of giving back. Men are more likely to wait until their business grows and then start engaging in philanthropy.”

One example that Pfund pointed to is Revolution Foods, a client in Alameda that provides healthy school lunches.

“The way they run it is very inclusive,” she said. “They hire people who’ve had difficult lives and have built a culture with a fine attention to quality of life and income development for their employees.”

The company, in partnership with Whole Foods, launched in summer of 2006 and now serves 100 schools organic, hormone- and antibiotic-free milk and meats, free of artificial sweeteners and preservatives. It also delivers nutrition education along with the fresh meals.

### Inspired by personal experiences

Inspiration often comes from the problems women have encountered through their own experiences, and their goal is to create solutions as much as make money.

Amra Tareen always knew she wanted to own her own company, but the perfect fit didn’t evolve out of her successful career in the corporate world, vetting communications ventures at Sevin Rosen Funds. It came out of Sept. 11 and an earthquake in her native Pakistan. Tareen wasn’t happy with the media’s portrayal of Muslims after Sept. 11. But she was equally disturbed when she returned to Pakistan to help with earthquake relief in 2006 to find out how much hatred against Americans had developed since she last visited, 10 years earlier.

“I am a Muslim woman with a very diverse background, and after 9/11 we couldn’t get the other side of the story on the ground,” she said. Later, in Pakistan, “I realized how much things had changed. They thought Americans just wanted to destroy all the Muslims.”

Her web venture, allvoices.com, is up and operating with 16 employees and just signed a lease for office space in downtown San Francisco. The site aims to bring to the world the unfiltered voices of ordinary people experiencing current events.

Other female entrepreneurs started businesses after similarly upsetting events.

Maggie Haertsch started a business to train people in high-risk professions to prevent accidents after she was horrified with how long it took to deregister an unqualified midwife in her native Australia.

Haertsch, who just moved to Silicon Valley to grow the company and raise venture capital in the U.S., founded Voicemap to deal with the problem. The automated training system has shown significant reductions in workplace accidents and is now in use at many Australian hospitals, mining and oil operations, and the parliament house in Sydney, for emergency response procedures.

For Margot Eiran, it was a lifelong passion, rather than a single event that led her to a startup.

Eiran fell naturally into a caretaker role with the environment, having grown up camping and hiking in South Africa. “You can’t help but be struck by a deep love for it and desire to protect it and nurture it,” she said.

After immigrating to the United States, she was about to pass up a spot at Harvard Business School until she learned that social and environmental entrepreneurship classes had been added.

It was there she learned much about the financial case for energy savings. Thus, HomeEnergySaver.com, which won the 2008 Women 2.0 and Stanford Women in Business Conference’s People’s Choice award, was born. Eiran, who works out of Boston, together with her staff out of San Francisco, will launch it this month.

The site will offer homeowners a place to learn about and calculate specific energy savings and purchase products.

### Ambition remains

Though there’s altruism behind these projects, these women are businesspeople who see the value of growing their companies.

Haertsch sees the social good behind her company and is very ambitious about the business prospects. “I don’t want this to just be a mom-and-pop business,” she said. “I think this is really going to transform the way in which people provide critical information around very important procedures in the work environment — infrastructure, critical utilities, safety, health care. We’re very mindful it’s a very big market.”

Likewise, Wendy Grant, who founded the Cord Blood Registry in 1995, wants to expand. Grant saw that the cord blood banks “could save lives,” and today over 70

SEE RESPONSIBLE, 7

# SMWM embraces big picture design, planning

BY BLANCA TORRES  
San Francisco Business Times

One afternoon in 1991 changed everything for SMWM. The San Francisco architecture firm had enjoyed success early with the San Francisco Main Library and other projects. Cathy Simon, co-founding principal and the "S" in the firm's name, took a call from New York urban planner Karen Alschuler.

**SMWM**  
HQ: San Francisco.

**2007 revenue:** \$11.4 million.

**Employees:** 50.

**Women owners:** Cathy Simon, Karen Alschuler, Linda Sobuta.

**San Francisco projects:** Ferry Building, Metreon, Treasure Island.

Simon reluctantly agreed to meet Alschuler. The two had an "amazing" discussion that led to Alschuler joining in 1992 to establish the firm's urban design division.

Thanks to its combination of strengths in design and planning, SMWM is now one of the largest women-owned architecture firms in the country, raking in \$11.4 million last year with a lineup of high-profile projects that span the Bay Area, the nation and the world.

"We truly have a multi-disciplinary practice," Simon said. "Our approach is different. Our planners look at the big picture while our architects look at building, but we bring them together."

SMWM employs more than 50 people at its offices in San Francisco and New York. The latter opened in 2001.

The firm specializes in urban in-fill projects such as the \$67 million renovation of the Ferry Building in 2003, the \$80 million Metreon development and various ele-



**Fertile ground:** Simon (left) and Alschuler worked on a garden for Slow Food Nation.

ments of the redevelopment at Mission Bay. It also includes smaller projects, such as designing the "victory garden" at City Hall as part of the recent Slow Food Nation festival.

Current projects include the conversion of a former hospital into residential units in the Presidio by Forest City, redevelopment of the naval station on Treasure Island, a Stanford University extension office in Redwood City, redevelopment of the naval weapons station in Concord and reconfiguring of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles.

SMWM also carved niches for itself in designing educational buildings for institutions including Harvard University, University of Washington, Brown University and New York University.

"They usually look to the larger dimen-

sion of things whether they are designing a single building or a piece of a city," said Jay Turnbull, president of San Francisco-based architecture firm Page & Turnbull, which has worked on various projects with SMWM. "They certainly stand out from the crowd."

Simon said the firm starts with three core tenets of safety, utility and delight.

"We always ask ourselves, 'How do you design a city or building that people are thrilled to be in?'" Simon said. "We have a real devotion to cities and the public realm where people can really come together."

Simon runs the firm's architectural design practice while Alschuler runs the urban planning component. The firm has two other principals, John Long, who heads the education division, and Linda

Sobuta, who is also minority partner, and an associate principal, Prakash Pinto.

"The key aspect is in the fact that the two senior people represent good design and good planning and it's mixed in the firm," Turnbull said. "That doesn't happen in all architecture firms."

When beginning a new project, Alschuler gives everyone a seat and at the table and a voice.

"We don't come in with an idea and expect people to accept it," she said. "We try to incorporate thoughts and ideas and then come up with a design."

The hard part is that, as Alschuler put it, "architectural design is not a group process," but planning is.

Many clients seek the firm out for their ability to involve community members during the entitlement process. "SMWM has a very sophisticated community-based approach to land planning," said Aidan Barry, Oakland-based vice president of Catellus Development Group, which hired SMWM for a \$33 million office, retail and resident development along Alameda's waterfront. "They know how to address the community and accomplish what they community wants and communicates with them when their needs can't be satisfied."

The focus on collaboration stems from inside the firm, where Simon and Alschuler have worked to create an environment where the staff feels comfortable, but also inspired to work hard.

"Our values are embedded in what we do every day and every year of making that extra effort," Alschuler said. "The progression of the firm comes from taking our original values and applying them to larger and larger projects."

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genetic diseases are being treated. The company is also a success with \$100 million in revenue.

"I'm impressed by our growth, but don't think we've gone as far as we should go," said Grant, adding that she hopes to get insurance companies involved with cord blood stores for those people who have a strong family history of certain diseases.

### Philanthropy key

In addition to having a mission as part of their business model, these firms often engage in philanthropy. For example, the Cord Blood Registry also offers free cord blood collection, processing and storage to any family that has a current medical need. And Voicemap has shared its success by supporting a school in Kabul, helping fund tree planting, a health clinic and science lab in a school in Kabul. "It really does add meaning to what you do," said Haertsch.

These paths to entrepreneurship involved lots of hard work. But these women agreed that taking the reins to bring their own ideas to life comes with its own energy jolt.

"Sometimes when I was tired and things got me down or depressed, I'd say maybe I can do something else," said Tareen. But with her own business, "I see something on TV and I get re-energized. I feel more of a purpose."

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## Women tackle environment, health and politics

### ALLVOICES.COM

**HQ:** San Francisco.

**Founder:** Amara Tareen.

**Launched:** 2006.

**Funding:** \$4.5 million from Vantage Point Ventures.

**Employees:** 16.

**Mission:** The site aims to bring to the world the unfiltered voices of ordinary people experiencing current events.

**Catalyst:** When Tareen returned to her native Pakistan in 2006 to help with earthquake relief, she was disturbed by the hatred of Americans she saw there. "I felt we really needed to get discussions going because all our lives are interconnected. I thought (that) we need places where your voice gets heard but also what other people might be saying."

**Future plans:** Tareen hopes to share advertising revenue with some contributors.

### VOICEMAP

**HQ:** Sunnyvale.

**Founder:** Maggie Haertsch.

**Launched:** Haertsch founded the company in Australia in 2004 and moved it to Silicon Valley in 2008 to grow Voicemap and raise venture capital.

**Funding:** Seeking venture funds.

**Mission:** An automated training system that teaches people in high-risk professions how to prevent accidents. Voicemap



Haertsch

is now in use in Australian hospitals, mining and oil operations and the parliament house in Sydney. The company has shared its success by supporting a school in Kabul.

**Catalyst:** Years ago, Haertsch was discouraged with how long it took to deregister an unqualified midwife in her native Australia. "It was horrifying how someone could be practicing for so long and go unrecognized and cause so much grief for so many people."

### THE BLOOD CORD REGISTRY

**HQ:** San Bruno.

**Founder:** Wendy Grant.

**Launched:** 1995.

**Revenue:** More than \$100 million.

**Employees:** 300.

**Mission:** She created one of the nation's first cord blood banks — and launched a new industry.

Over 70 diseases are being treated, and more than 50 companies have joined Grant's Cord Blood Registry in offering storage banks. Cord blood cells can be used to treat genetic diseases that later develop in a child, his or her siblings or mother. "Today, when we look at cerebral palsy and brain injury being treated with cord blood cells, it's not something I never planned on," said Grant. "It gives you an additional rush."

**Business model:** There's a one-time initial

fee for collection, processing and first-year storage of \$2,150. Thereafter, storage is \$125 a year. They have a variety of monthly payment plans, from \$48 a month over 60 months (which includes interest) to six- and 12-month interest-free plans at \$358 and \$180 a month.

**Future plans:** To get insurance companies involved with cord blood stores for those people who have a strong family history of certain diseases.

### HOMEENERGYSAVER.COM

**HQ:** San Francisco and Boston.

**Founder:** Margot Eiran.

**Launched:** September, 2008.

**Funding:** Undisclosed seed funding.

**Mission:** The site will offer homeowners a simple, one-stop place to learn about and calculate specific energy savings, and purchase products at prices competitive with stores like Home Depot.

**Catalyst:** As part of Harvard's green campus initiative, she did a project on how to make school buildings more energy efficient. It led to a contract with the university to do just that.

**Future plans:** Eventually, she hopes to offer financial incentives and help with financial rebates and tax credit information.



Grant



Eiran

—Robin Evans ■