

A Day in the Life of Ellen Gustafson

Sustainable food systems activist Ellen Gustafson is Founder and Executive Director of the 30 Project and was also co-founder of FEED Projects which creates products to help combat hunger through fashion. She speaks to *Sight and Life* about how she came to be involved in the fight against hunger, how Western consumers' food choices can have repercussions around the world, and her new project, Change Dinner."

Sight and Life (S&L): *Ellen, you've said that you never saw yourself as an entrepreneur but you've become involved in something which is entrepreneurial in the broadest sense, literally undertaking to create change in the field of hunger. How did this happen?*

Ellen Gustafson (EG): I think becoming an entrepreneur comes less out of the desire to run an organization than out of the desire to accomplish a specific goal. My co-founder Lauren Bush and I were based at the UN and she had the idea of using fashion to focus attention on combating hunger. I thought I could make it happen at the World Food Programme (WFP), but the reality of what we wanted to accomplish was so much broader – getting consumers to give a few of their “fashion dollars” to fighting hunger – that starting FEED was really the only way to do this.

S&L: *What prompted you to join the World Food Programme in the first place?*

EG: I was in my senior year at Columbia in New York studying Security, Politics and International Relations when 9/11 happened, changing the landscape of everything I was studying, and my personal focus. After college I joined a think tank dealing with global foreign affairs and US-international relations. My second job was at ABC News, again covering terrorism.

I soon realized that places worldwide where security is a long-term problem are also places with food insecurity, for example the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan and surrounding regions. So, I shifted my focus from security to addressing the underlying hunger problem, and joined the WFP.

S&L: *That's very interesting because issues of politics, terrorism and war are not often covered by publications such as Sight and Life, are they?*

EG: That's true. Also, while working in the news media, I felt there was a lot of interest in talking about terrorist attacks, but until recently, the connection between such unrest and food security had not been paid much attention. Interestingly, however, the person that kicked off the 'Arab Spring' was a Tunisian food vendor. The two issues are incredibly connected, and early investment in nutrition is a very smart way to deal with potential security problems.

S&L: *Did you ever imagine that FEED might become as big as it has?*

EG: No, but now that I'm watching FEED from the sidelines, I realize that FEED, as an idea and as a company, really was the right message at the right time. When we first started discussing a company for the purpose of 'doing good', there weren't any other models of this kind. Now there are so many charity/brand hybrids out there that it has become a segment of fashion.

Today, there are hundreds of companies, not only in the food security and hunger space, but across the board, that have used the FEED model as an example of what they want to achieve in their own businesses. I think this is our most enduring legacy, and I'm very proud of what we created.

S&L: *Was there a moment when you thought, 'This thing's really taking off' – a tipping point?*

A black and white close-up portrait of a young woman with long, light-colored hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a dark top and small hoop earrings. The background is softly blurred, showing other people in a social setting.

“Strong women who can stand up not only for the plight of women, but for the good fight for peace and democracy in general, are women I really admire.”

EG: Yes, there was. We had always wanted to get our products into the health food store Whole Foods, because we thought it was the right message to send people; while you're feeding your family healthy food – and therefore, obviously, you care about health and nutrition – we offer an opportunity for you to help people around the world at the same time.

When this eventually happened, Whole Foods placed an order with us for over 400,000 units. Until that point, we'd been producing about 10,000 units, and that was the moment when we realized, in the phrase from the movie Jaws, "We're going to need a bigger boat!"

S&L: *This mixture between fashion and philanthropy is rather unusual isn't it? What inspired you to put the two together?*

EG: It had a lot to do with meeting Lauren, and realizing that her name and family background gave her an incredible platform which she was using to improve the world. With the broader story of fashion doing good, you see that those with names or brands that people are enchanted by really do have the power to focus attention on issues that need recognition.

S&L: *You've already done some very dramatic things. Now, you're involved in a new challenge with the 30 Project.*

EG: Having travelled with the WFP and the Millennium Villages Project I realized that no matter where you are in the developing world, you can usually find highly-processed sodas and packaged, highly-refined food products. And I noticed that despite the massive problems of undernutrition in rural areas, in the cities in these regions, people tended to be overweight.

Then I'd fly home and notice that the same offerings – soda and processed food – are available there too. Similarly, there are large numbers of overweight people. So, I made a connection between hunger and obesity in different regions, and how in both cases unhealthy food is available but good, nutritious food is not. Also, I was turning 30, and in my research I started seeing the year 1980 everywhere. I realized that perhaps changes in the food system in the last three decades led to where we are today. That's the story of the 30 Project!

S&L: *People are now talking about food deserts in cities aren't they? Can you talk about this phenomenon whereby, in the heart of civilization, people can't get anything nutritious to eat?*

EG: Absolutely. People living in affluent, suburban neighborhoods in Manhattan or London will have several large supermarkets nearby. But in many areas in major cities, it's a different story. Take the Bronx in New York, where food imported via New

York is stored. The very neighborhood that the food of the city's 15 million inhabitants passes through doesn't have any grocery stores. Residents' only option is often just a corner store which obviously doesn't offer a sufficient range of fruits, vegetables, quality meats and fresh milk. The fact is that in poorer areas in the West, people simply don't have the same access to a wide range of quality food as the rest of us.

S&L: *You mentioned starting the 30 Project as a result of reflecting on your own stage in life. Are you able to mobilize the younger generation in the direction of the kind of change you're looking for?*

EG: Absolutely. At this particular moment in time, across a wide range of the economic spectrum in the US, most people are interested in nutrition in some way, whether it's buying organic milk or eating vegetarian a few days a week, or checking product labels and trying to make their diets healthier. There's a strong movement for local, farm-fresh products and understanding where your food comes from, and also how our choices at home might have effects around the world. We must think through real, strategic ways of connecting the way we eat with making sure quality food is available to everyone; that's the challenge a lot of people in the food industry struggle with, and that I'm passionate about addressing.

S&L: *You obviously have a lot of energy and dynamism. What's your working life like? Do you live at a frenetic pace or do you have some sort of structure and rhythm?*

EG: Definitely the former! But I've recently moved to California which is more relaxed. I have a bigger kitchen and can have people over, and the weather's nice so you can go for a jog. Those are the things that can help to keep your life a bit sane. The thing I've found with travelling a lot is that there are wonderful people everywhere, and as a people person that's incredibly motivating, even at a frenetic pace.

S&L: *When you were at college you studied music and art; have these influenced your thinking and do you manage to pursue those interests nowadays?*

EG: They certainly have. People tend to forget that human beings are very similar everywhere, and art and music are a great reflection of that. For example, around the world, people find ways to make music – so with music you can literally see the thread of commonality running through all of humanity. Personally, I'm trained in singing and often sing at friends' weddings. I think bringing a personal talent to someone's special day is the best gift you can give.

S&L: *Is there an individual who's inspired you directly?*

EG: There are so many! Right now, I've adopted Hillary Clinton's habit of eating a lot of hot peppers because the capsaicin in peppers is really good for you, and she's someone whose energy and schedule I really admire. I also admire President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia. Strong women who can stand up not only for the plight of women, but for the good fight for peace and democracy in general, are women I really admire.

S&L: *What message would you like to pass on to our readers?*

EG: One thing I truly try to do is simply live my values. We often think of philanthropy as separate from day-to-day life; we work, make money and go about our day, then at some point write a check to a charitable organization. There's nothing terribly wrong with that, but the truth is that day-to-day life can actually be much more harmful or helpful to the world than our checks. Especially in the nutrition space, if people start doing very basic things such as learning to cook for themselves, valuing family dinner, and making healthful choices, a lot of the systems that deliver food to us will really improve.

S&L: *Are there any new projects you're working on that you are looking forward to?*

EG: Yes, there's my new campaign "Change Dinner, Change the World." The idea is simple; if we change our eating habits, and eat healthy – more fresh vegetables from farmers who get paid fair wages for example – those changes will reverberate positively around the world and help even the malnourished access food better. The power of the Western consumer is so great that if we start to eat in a way that is better for the planet, the planet will improve.

S&L: *We couldn't conclude this interview with asking, what is your favorite dish?*

EG: I'm completely taken by Greek tzatziki, a mixture of yoghurt, dill, cucumber and olive oil. I absolutely love those flavors, and one of my favorite things right now is to lightly grill zucchini and pour a bit of yoghurt, olive oil and oregano on top of it. It's very simple and healthy, but very good.

S&L: *Thank you, Ellen, for talking to Sight and Life. We wish you the very best of luck with Change Dinner, the 30 Project, and with your future projects of which we are sure there will be many.*

EG: Thank you!

Ellen Gustafson was interviewed by Jonathan Steffen