

## REMARKABLE PEOPLE 2015

### INHERITING COMPASSION AND DOING THE RIGHT THING WITH JENNIFER ZAHGKUNI

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My interview series, REMARKABLE PEOPLE 2015 includes experts in technology, the arts, marketing, and social good. It is an exciting group of creative thought leaders and enlightened personalities. Some are extraordinary examples of humanity and social responsibility like Jennifer Zahgkuni; others are creating game-changing paradigm shifts in their market segments.

Please meet Jennifer Zahgkuni of The Forgotten International (TFI) whose transformative work alleviates extreme poverty especially among women and children who live at the edge of life and death.

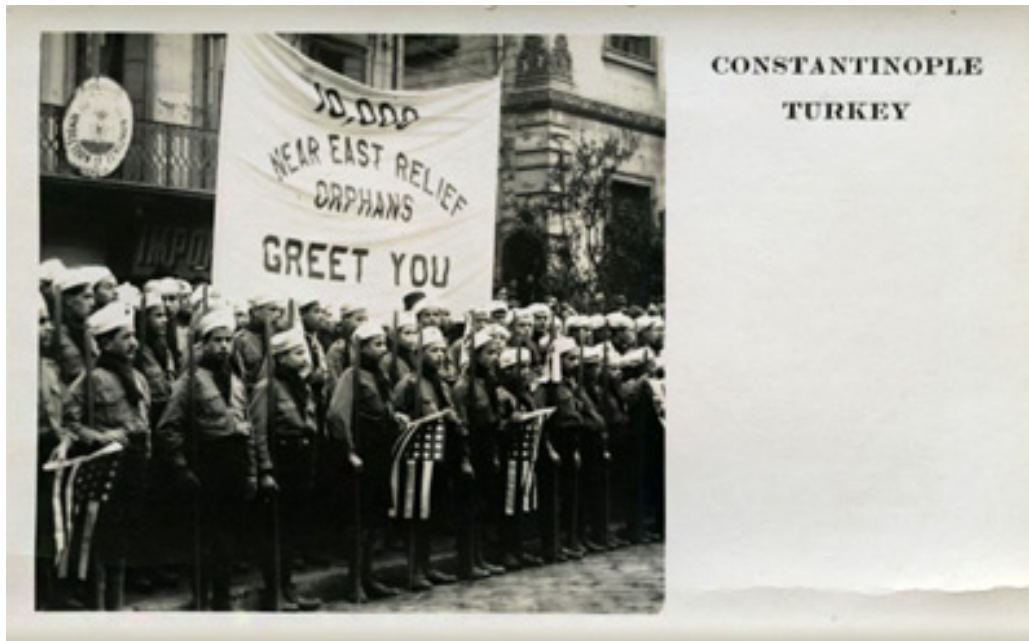
Jennifer inherited a passion for doing the right thing. She has a legal mindset, is a professional administrator, a developer of Foundation and Fellowship Programs, a relationship builder, and an astute and compassionate humanitarian. She is a worldview treasure.



2015 Photo by Thomas Nazario, San Francisco, CA. USA.

Jennifer believes that lasting change can be achieved if everybody acknowledges a responsibility to repay a communal debt or pay one forward. She says, “You never know when you will be the one who needs help! It shouldn’t be from a place of guilt or obligation, but rather from a collective sense that we are all one; that we are all connected.”

“Life often isn’t fair, and terrible things happen to good people, so we must ensure a balance whenever we can.”



Source: Postcard from the Near East Foundation Archive

### **A lineage of compassion...**

Jennifer shines a familial light on such kindness that came in 1915. The Near East Foundation was created to address the extreme refugee crisis in Armenia during the First World War. Their model of “citizen philanthropy” allowed everyday people to get involved in the relief effort, and in the coming years, they saved over one million lives that otherwise would have perished.

Jennifer’s grandfather was one of tens of thousands of orphans from that still unrecognized genocide.

## That was then...

**Caption: 1915, Armenian deportees – women, children and elderly men. Woman in foreground is carrying a child in her arms, shielding it from the sun with a shawl; man on left is carrying bedding; no other belongings or food noticeable among effects being carried. All are walking in the sun and on an unpaved road with no means of shelter from the elements. Location: Ottoman Empire, region Syria.**



© Armenian National Institute, Inc. courtesy of Sybil Stevens

Jennifer said, “While a century has passed, and much is forgotten, the outpouring of compassion should not be lost in the chronicles of the historical record and should remain alive in every new generation. I very much believe that I am here today because a hundred years ago complete strangers helped my family simply because it was the right thing to do. It is always the right thing to do.”

## And now...



Source: Yannis Behrakis, REUTERS

**Caption: A Syrian refugee kissing his daughter while walking toward Greece’s border with Macedonia. Today’s refugees are flooding into Europe for safety from violence and persecution... eerily similar to Jennifer’s grandfather’s flight from the Armenian genocide exactly 100 years ago.**

“Of course, it is distressing to see humanitarian disasters on the news day after day; nevertheless, I hope our shared response to suffering will always place compassion and kindness first.”

**MARY OLSON: What kind of work were you doing before you joined The Forgotten International?**

**JENNIFER ZAHGKUNI:** I worked for TFI on a volunteer basis when we were first starting the organization in 2007. Now that I think back on that period, I don’t quite know how I managed it while engaged full time elsewhere. I worked in educational administration for over 12 years before being able to devote myself fully to our nonprofit.

I met Tom Nazario, the founder of TFI, at the University of San Francisco School of Law. He had just returned from his first trip to India and what would be a life-altering meeting with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. One of the first big projects we worked on together was helping to coordinate a visit to USF by His Holiness to receive an Honorary Degree from the University in 2003.



Source: The Chauntra School. Tibetan students in India with Jennifer Zahgkuni



The following summer I left USF to live and work in Dharamsala, India, as a volunteer English teacher at one of the Tibetan schools established by the Tibetan Government in Exile. We didn't know it at the time, but this is how TFI's Fellowship Program began, and we continue to send skilled volunteers abroad each year to Dharamsala and four other sites around the world.

It was also the beginning of our work with the Tibetan community. We have been fortunate to have several opportunities since to host His Holiness at various events in the Bay Area and even more fortunate to be able to help Tibetan organizations in the U.S. and abroad.



2014. Tom Nazario, HHDL and Debra Fischer, Los Angeles, CA. USA.

**Presenting Tom Nazario's book, *Living on a Dollar a Day: The Lives and Faces of The World's Poor*, to His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama for which he penned the introduction.**

**MO: How would you characterize TFI when you first started working with the Foundation?**

**JZ:** When Tom [Nazario] envisioned TFI, it was always with the intention of helping those in need that were underserved and otherwise forgotten (hence our name, The Forgotten International).

We used our early years to learn how to build and deliver truly invaluable programs and manage our commitments to the very first NGOs. Listening to those in need has made all the difference in our work abroad and at home. What has changed over time is the “how” of what we do.

Our personal connection to the programs now facilitates closer relationships with our donors who feel more involved with the projects they support. They also know that we give 100% of donors' funds to their designated programs or projects.



© 2010 Renée C. Byer, Pulitzer Prize Winning Photojournalist, Sacramento, CA.

**In Agbogbloshie, Accra, the capital city of Ghana, Fati, 8, works along with other children who live on the edge of life and death in a toxic eWaste dumpsite. Her condition was recently remedied by the TFI Children’s Fund that introduced a better life including food, a bed and school.**

**MO: You touch every aspect of the Foundation in one way or another. What facets offer the most creativity...the places where you add your imprint?**

**JZ:** I enjoy wearing many hats at TFI as it gives me the opportunity to see how all the pieces fit together and what is needed where. It also makes clear the realities of running a business and the importance of being as resourceful and efficient as possible. The most satisfying part, without question, is the giving.

Whenever we make a gift of any amount, even to an organization we have supported for years, it is the most joyful feeling, even addicting, I would say. Whenever anyone has the opportunity to give, they should jump on it. Nothing feels better. If you give, either a gift of time or money, to a person or an organization that really needs this help, you see the impact, I predict you won't be able to do it just once.

Our Fellows learn this when they go abroad to volunteer with our programs. They all tell us how enriching the experience was personally and professionally, and when we follow up with them even years later, they say their time abroad through TFI remains on of their most treasured and unforgettable life experiences.



Jennifer Zahgkuni and Tom Nazario with Dawa Dorjee USF Graduate and Dawa's mother.

**Celebrating the USF graduation of a Tibetan student from India who was chosen to come to the University of San Francisco on a scholarship program Tom Nazario had started as part of the visit by His Holiness to the University.**

I, for one, would never give up the two months I spent teaching in India for anything. I carry the memories of that experience with me still, and it influences all aspects of how I do my work.

**MO: What do you envision for the Foundation going forward? What opportunities do you see for yourself going forward?**

**JZ:** With TFI closing in on eight years of operations this year, my hope for the organization is that by being diligent, we have earned a reliable reputation for service to the poor. I would like to see these efforts bear fruit in increased collaborations with larger foundations and corporations that want a trusted organization to partner with so that together we can create a greater impact on our shared mission of helping more people rise up out of crushing poverty.

I would like to see my role gradually expand to be more involved in the field. With current technologies making it possible to work from anywhere, I feel more confident about stepping away from my desk from time to time whenever it makes sense for me to do so. I look forward to visiting more of the programs TFI supports and meeting the people we work with around the world. It makes all the difference to be able to spend time with the communities we try to serve and strengthen the relationships between our organization and the NGOs we work with abroad.

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## Interview by Mary Olson

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