



2014 Girls Impact The World Film Festival (GITWFF) Finalists: Kathryn Harhai, Jordyn Roach, Sarah Gale, Actor and Awards Judge Ian Somerhalder, Adriana Jackson, Sarah Khan



Connecther Founder, Lila Igram with Edna Adan (l) and Khalida Brohi (r). Both women have received support from Connecther.

Lila Igram *and* Her Impact

STORY BY AVA LOVE HANNA | PHOTOS BY HEIDI LIM AND KELLY ROBINSON

LILA IGRAM, founder of Connecther, an Austin based non-profit focused on global poverty alleviation for women and children, wants to make the world a better place. A one-time stay

at home mom, Lila says she was always interested in conscious business practices and had a secret desire to be involved in social entrepreneurship. When her children got older, she began volunteering and working

for a non-profit and thinking about the possibility of launching her own project. When an opportunity arose, Lila started working on Connecther. Starting from scratch without knowing the industry, Lila learned to bootstrap and ask others for help with things like building a website, or getting donations to help pay for 501(c)(3) status. With the success of her bootstrap campaign, Connecther, a communication and crowdfunding platform for issues pertinent to women and children around the world, was born.

Connecther focuses on women and children in developing communities. A key difference between Connecther and other poverty alleviation non-profits is their approach. Rather than bringing in groups from outside the community, Connecther works to find and utilize people in the local community who are already affecting change in the area,

people like Edna Adan. Edna lives in Somaliland and is working to train 1000 midwives to help reduce the extremely high rate of maternal and infant mortality in an area that, following a bitter civil war, has few health professionals. Lila says of Edna, "Women like her are why we are doing this work. We want to highlight the awesome initiatives that are already happening." Lila adds that Edna works within her own culture and community. Unlike an outsider with good intentions, Edna has the advantage of knowing what is appropriate for her culture and what would be taboo. She knows how to inspire the women in this area, moreover, because this is her home, Edna is deeply vested in this community and motivated to see real change take place. "That's the passion that drives me," Lila says, "to spotlight people



Kathryn Harhai (2nd from left) 2014 GITWFF Winner for her film Point B, receives her prize from attending judges Abigail Disney, Lila Igram, Eloise DeJoria, Ian Somerhalder, Harvard students Kerry Hammond and Ara Parikh (GITWFF Co-Directors), Deepa Donde, film maker and GITWFF Advisor



2013 GITW Film Festival participants



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in a community that don't always get the best rap. We tend to think of them as poor or in need, but these women are already empowered; they are brilliant, and they are doing work that is more effective than what someone from the US could do."

Connecter works to increase the visibility of smaller scale projects that might have previously gone unnoticed but can have dramatic impacts on communities. Also, "By aggregating and consolidating hundreds of women and children focused non-profit projects, Connecter provides a platform for a single donor or a donor group, such as a corporation looking for a philanthropic cause, to see over 91 % of their donated dollars go directly to those in underdeveloped communities that are willing and driven to work for self-reliance."

Another initiative of Connecter is the annual Girls Impact the World Film Festival. Presented jointly by Connecter and the Harvard College Social Innovation Collaborative, the film festival and scholarship program, now in its second year, is open for high school and undergraduate college students to submit 3 to 5 minute films that focus on global women's issues. Winners have the opportunity for internships and cash prizes, including a grand prize of \$5,000. According to Lila, the film festival and Connecter share the same vision, "We want to provide opportunities for young people to share their stories and voices to impact change all over the world." Among them are voices like those of Zoë Simone Yi and Rebecca Dharmapalan whose film, *International Boulevard*, won the grand prize in 2013. Their film was a documentary about sex-trafficking in Oakland, California. Since winning the film festival, the girls have gone on to create a task force for youth in Oakland and are helping to rejuvenate efforts to fight trafficking in their city.

The 2014 grand prize winning film, *Point B* by Kathryn Harhai, provides



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a moving look at domestic violence from the perspective of the victim by following a girl who reflects on her experience with sexual abuse twelve years after it happened. "The interesting thing about this film," Lila says, "was that we did not know if it was real or fiction. The judges overwhelmingly related to the film, and it was only after the festival that I found out that it really happened. Kathryn had journaled about the experience, and a friend told her she had to make a film and submit it to the contest. She said that making the film was therapeutic, and I am so happy that we could provide a platform for her." Winners of the film festival have come from numerous countries including China, Thailand, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Launched two years ago, the film festival has been incredibly successful, receiving 250 submissions, all quality films, where students pour out their passions. Submitted films are available to view online on the Connecter.org website. Lila adds that while the films are focused on issues that affect women and girls, men are also invited to submit films and are welcome to help advance the issue of empowering women and girls.

Connecter's vision and mission is to focus on women and girls in developing communities and to highlight brave strong women from all over the world. "We're a startup, so whenever we have setbacks, we go back and focus on that mission. The way to help is by investing in people and investing in communities. They are brilliant and empowered, and it's just a matter of finding them, investing in them, and helping to provide opportunities." For Lila Igram, every day is an opportunity to work with inspired, committed people who are focused on making their communities and the world a better place.