

The Professional Philanthropist

Wust be nice being a philanthropist. Like philosophy, philanthropy has always seemed to be the perfect lofty profession for the bored, the wealthy and the entitled. You'd think a regular person could never actually be a professional philanthropist. That is, until you meet Kathy LeMay.

I first met LeMay at Eclipse, a restaurant in Northampton, Mass., where I work. She had rented our small, independently owned, newly opened eatery for her birthday party, which, naturally, she had also turned into a fundraiser (for sustainable food) and an art show for her ex-wife. Between the countless speeches I heard that night raving about LeMay's work, and the personal, caring relationship she's built with our restaurant since then, I can vouch for the fact that LeMay is good at her job. She's an expert weaver of webs—connecting people, knitting together previously disparate projects and places, making our world smaller, and making us that much more accountable to one another. Funny, genuine and gorgeous to boot, LeMay makes being a “professional philanthropist” real indeed.

However, LeMay didn't have the lofty title of philanthropist in mind when, at age 24, she was walking past a Seattle newsstand and saw an array of cover stories featuring the screaming faces of Bosnian Muslim women. “The stories inside were about the rape-genocide camps that had been built by the Serbian military,” she recalls. “Their purpose [was] ethnic cleansing. [But] they did not kill Bosnian Muslim women. They raped them for months on end, in front of the women's children, then released them. Their goal was to demoralize the souls of people, to rid the world of purely Bosnian Muslim people. I couldn't breathe. I felt I had been punched in the gut. I didn't know what to do about what was happening.” Like most people, LeMay struggled to understand these horrendous events that were happening thousands of miles away. “I couldn't reconcile the two worlds. In one, I'm working for a nonprofit, getting vegan pizza with my then girlfriend and going to matinees, if we could gather up enough change. At that exact moment in another world, women were being dragged out of their homes as part of a strategic war plan, and being raped.”

When she talked about her feelings to others, they told her what many of us have heard before—there's nothing you can do about it and you should try to put it out of your mind. But LeMay just couldn't. “I had always asked of past atrocities, ‘Why didn't anyone *do* anything?’ Now it was time to ask

myself: What was I going to do about it?”

After meeting people who were volunteering in the Balkans, LeMay was determined to go, too. She got a second job to scrape up the airfare, and even when at the last minute all the other women who'd planned to go with her dropped out of the project, she still went—alone. “I can recall as though it were minutes ago boarding Air Croatia with six Serbian businessmen. There I was, my little backpack filled with infant formula, wondering if this little sardine can would hold together,” she laughs.

Now, 18 years later, LeMay's decision to change the world one person at a time has taken her to a leadership position in two powerful companies. LeMay is the founder, president and CEO of Raising Change, LLC (raisingchange.com), which she started with the goal of helping progressive nonprofits raise the funds they need to “advance a social-change agenda worldwide”; today, Raising Change secures financial stability for organizations from New York to Mexico City. LeMay is also the chair of the board of directors of World Pulse. Working from a sustainable, ground-level perspective, World Pulse (worldpulse.com) has built an interactive media network devoted to bringing women a global voice. World Pulse partners with 40 top international organizations to reach over 100,000 individuals worldwide. Training an online network of citizen journalists and entrepreneurs, and publishing *World Pulse* magazine, it fosters a powerful, collective voice in women.

In addition to fighting for women's empowerment, LeMay wants to send the world another message: Anyone can do this. Her book, *The Generosity Plan* (which landed her an appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*), urges us to see “philanthropist” as a title available to all, regardless of our budget, personality or background. “When I was feeling overwhelmed about what to do about the genocide in Bosnia,” she says, “I read a quote by Teddy Roosevelt: ‘Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.’ I grew up working-poor, worked for a nonprofit, and didn't know anyone who was in politics, ran gigantic companies, or had the connections I thought could change the world. I decided to stop whining about what I didn't have and do what I could with what I had. In Bosnia, as small as it sounds, I showed up. I didn't have answers or solutions. I couldn't fix it. I also didn't ignore it or hide from it.” Her advice to the budding lesbian philanthropist? “Step into the thing that gives you grief, and when you're in there you'll find what you can do to change it.” ■

**Kathy LeMay
changes the
world, one
woman at a time.**

By Yana Tallon-Hicks

