

# Rebecca Kousky



**is the founder and Executive Director of Nest,** a nonprofit organization dedicated to changing the lives of women in developing countries.

Rebecca graduated with her Masters Degree in Social Work from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, in 2006. Two weeks later, at the age of 24, she founded Nest. Expanding upon the proven tool of microfinance lending, Nest gives small loans to women to build or maintain art or craft-based businesses. But unlike traditional banks, Nest allows loan recipients to repay their loans in crafts they make—a system Rebecca has dubbed “microbarter.” The crafts are then incorporated into Nest’s own line of merchandise, created exclusively for them by some of the country’s top designers and artisans, many of whom mentor and advise Nest’s loan recipients.

Nest also partners with U.S.-based designers who dedicate a percentage of their sales revenue to Nest’s programs, including Tory Burch, Kate Spade, and Ralph Lauren and has established ethical sourcing projects with Cosmopolitan Magazine, Lord and Taylor, FEED, Trina Turk, and others. In addition, Nest has written, and begun to implement, a curriculum especially designed to assist women in developing countries with basic business skills, professional and personal finance, budgeting, environmentally sound business practices and designing for, and marketing to, Western consumers. Nest gives women the three tools they need to escape poverty: money, mentoring, and a market for the goods they create. To date, Nest has assisted over two thousand women in ten countries.

Nest is also a hybrid—neither wholly business, strictly social enterprise, or only microfinance—and Rebecca is an unusual entrepreneur in that she understands both business and social enterprise, as well as “the feminine business mind,” which she believes to be distinct from the way men start and run businesses. Rebecca’s perspectives as a young business person, a woman, and a social entrepreneur mean that she is in demand as a speaker to diverse organizations: women’s groups, business groups, nonprofits, and educational settings.

She has spoken all over the country, including the Center for Global Development in Washington, D.C., Northern Illinois University, Saginaw Valley University, and Washington University. Nest and Rebecca have received global attention, including appearances on CNN and Fox News and in publications as varied as the Turkish Daily News, Cosmopolitan, Country Living, and Martha Stewart’s Body & Soul. Rebecca herself has received numerous awards. In 2007, she won the Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation Competition of the Skandalarias Center of Entrepreneurial Studies at Washington University. She was named one of the St. Louis Business Journal’s “30 under 30,” which recognizes the achievements of young entrepreneurs and executives, she was recognized as a “Young Person Who Rocks” in a televised CNN feature and Nest was a featured charity at the Sundance Film Festival.



# Speaking Topics

## Social Enterprise and the Changing Nature of Nonprofits

In a time when our country is incredibly divided—red and blue states, close, heated elections, elected officials and others taking extreme positions—the combination of business and social activism that is social enterprise finds a comfortable middle ground. Social entrepreneurs understand that what are generally considered to be conservative positions—supporting a market economy—or liberal ones—selflessly devoting your life to helping others—do not have to be competing goals. Social enterprise offers a way to both do good and be successful.

## Turning Interest to Action: Starting a Nonprofit

At the young age of 24, Rebecca gave herself a seemingly impossible task: she took on the issue of global poverty among women and created an international nonprofit from the ground up. Now, her organization is providing business development, interest-free microfinance and marketplace access to over 2000 women in ten countries. In this program, Rebecca will talk about how she turned her idea into reality, including the step by step process, potential pitfalls and available resources that will help aspiring social entrepreneurs get started.

## Being an Agent of Change Even at a Young Age

Is being young an asset or a liability to being an entrepreneur? Does it bring fresh thinking and creative ideas (not to mention an ability to live at greater financial risk, with long nights and little sleep)? Or is it an obstacle, when more experience and greater knowledge would be more beneficial? Listen to Rebecca's tale of starting an international nonprofit and learn how her age has both helped and hindered the growth of Nest.

## Microfinance

Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for their success in reducing poverty in the developing world through the use of microcredit loans. Since its founding in 1976, Grameen Bank has made over \$5 billion dollars in loans and the World Bank estimates that there are now more than 7,000 microfinance institutions, assisting about 16 million people in poverty. This is a proven idea that works. Learn more about the various models of microfinance, the successes, the drawbacks and several specific case studies, including the Grameen Bank and Rebecca's organization, Nest, which takes the idea of microfinance and expands on it.

## Social Work Practice with Women

Rebecca has practiced social work with women in a variety of settings and in a variety of countries. Her nonprofit, Nest, provides microfinance loans, mentoring and assistance to women artisans in developing countries. In this program, she will provide an overview on social work practice with women and address social issues facing women here and abroad, including health, poverty, discrimination and violence.

## Female Entrepreneurship

Research has shown that the number of female entrepreneurs is on the rise. Yet it has also been shown that women approach the creation of business very differently than men. Learn about the current research on female entrepreneurship, trends in female-run businesses and resources for women business owners. Rebecca's own nonprofit, Nest, practices female entrepreneurship in three ways: not only is she an entrepreneur herself, but she partners with U.S.-based artists and designers, themselves entrepreneurs, to help women in developing countries start their own businesses.

## The Importance of Social Evaluation

Even when nonprofits follow more traditional business models, evaluation is essential for ethical project development and to ensure that the nonprofit is constantly aligned with its core mission. Rebecca has created and built an extensive social measurement tool that she uses at Nest. Learn about the process of creating a reliable tool, the important variables to measure and other issues concerning evaluation, mission alignment and measuring success.

## Art-Based Nonprofit Work: The Merging of Two Worlds

Nest is unique in that it combines art and design with social service. Unlike many traditional art-based organizations, from museums to theatre, Nest combines an international philanthropic mission with the work of domestic artists. This program will offer several examples of art-based social services agencies, both here and abroad, the tools and models available for pursuing this type of enterprise and resources available to assist art-based social entrepreneurs.

## Choosing a Structure: Traditional Nonprofit or Compassionate

With the growth in nonprofit business-based organizations, and, simultaneously, corporations taking on social missions and agendas, the options for how to legally structure your new entity can be confusing. Rebecca talks about the differences between these two models and how to decide which is the best fit for you and your business.