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# Kim Valentini Gives Back

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER

AS ENTREPRENEURS, WE OFTEN THINK too much about profits and overlook the importance of philanthropy and giving back. I am honored to be a founding member of Smile Network International, and a lifetime member of the advisory board. My book, *It's a Jungle in There*, was written to inspire entrepreneurs, students and anybody with a dream. Chapter 28 is devoted to "The Importance of Philanthropy." One hundred percent of the profits I receive from the book are being donated to Smile Network International. Here are some insights on philanthropy from Kim Valentini, the exceptional woman who founded Smile Network.

**SS:** You had a high-powered career as a corporate exec; what inspired you to leave corporate America and build a non-profit? **KV:** A desire to do more with my life. I had a great run in the corporate world. I loved the work but felt something was missing. I was approaching 50 and was searching for something more meaningful.

**SS:** How did you choose this cause? **KV:** I knew that I wanted to be a voice for people who didn't have one. What we all have in common is a need to belong, to be a part of something larger. When you're a child born with a disfigurement you don't fit in.

The kids we serve [could] never go to school, never have a first love, never have a job and never get married. Some will be left to die at birth. All for lack of access to a surgery that takes 45 minutes and costs \$500.

**SS:** It seems like a huge undertaking to found a non-profit; how did you go about doing that? **KV:** I made a list of the things I wanted to accomplish in the next 50 years. My list kept coming back to doing something more meaningful.

What I didn't know was that the universe had a much bigger plan than I did. Fueled by passion, blind faith and the help of thousands of volunteers, Smile Network has become a global force serving children in India, Africa, Armenia, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras.

**SS:** Is your family involved in Smile Network International? **KV:** My husband David and my teenage children, Gino and Isabella, represent the very best part of my life. The truth be told, I have the privilege to do what I love



because I have a husband and children who are engaged in the success of Smile Network.

David's role in the charity is often underrated. He has a successful law practice. When I am traveling for extended periods he has twice the load. He is the glue and holds our family life together. In my absence he is the cook, tutor, chauffeur and does the grunt work. How many spouses can *honestly* say they have that level of support?

**SS:** What was your biggest business mistake and what did you learn from it? **KV:** My biggest failure is mistaking constructive feedback for criticism. My passion and the desire to get the job done get in the way of my ability to listen objectively to people I perceive are slowing me down.

This work crosses geographical boundaries as well a political agendas and ideological philosophies. I've learned that you have to be fearless. How can you know your limits if you are afraid of failure?

**SS:** Who is your biggest inspiration? **KV:** The volunteers who unselfishly give of their time and talents. Virtually everyone associated with Smile Network is a volunteer. People of all ages and walks of life contribute their time and talents to make this organization soar. They are the heroes in this story. Because of the efforts of the volunteers we have been able to provide thousands of children around the world with a smile.

**SS:** Do you have other business ideas that you would like to pursue someday? **KV:** Travel, photography and writing move me. My travels with Smile Network have taken me off the beaten track and I always have a camera in my hand. Many of the people I meet have never seen an image of themselves so the camera becomes a tool for building relationships.

**SS:** What thoughts and advice do you have for other entrepreneurs, business professionals and students? **KV:** Get engaged. Support a cause that moves you! I believe it is our responsibility to leave the world a better place than we found it. We all have unique talents and skills that can be used to do good.



« Steven Schussler (steven@schusslercreative.com) is the founder, chairman and CEO of Schussler Creative, Inc., which specializes in creating, designing and developing theatrical attractions, restaurants, retail stores and entertainment venues worldwide. He is also the author of *It's a Jungle in There - Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring*.