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LA JOLLA LIGHT

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NEWS

Foundation for Women stomps out poverty

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR

By Travis Hunter

LA JOLLA LIGHT

One local La Jollan has helped thousands of women around the globe achieve economic independence starting with loans of less than \$100, but she won't take credit for the idea.

"I like to say God had a really good idea and I was fortunate enough to hear it," Deborah Lindholm said.

Lindholm is the founder and executive director of the Foundation for Women, which she started in 1997 after being exposed firsthand to extreme poverty during her previous career as a financial researcher.

"For 10 years, I travelled the world to developing financial markets," Lindholm said. "I remember driving through Turkey, and seeing a woman in her black Muslim dress, working in the fields with two babies on her back on a hot day, while her husband was sitting on a cart in the shade. I remember looking at her and thinking, 'Why was she born here, and I was born where I was born?'"

Lindholm also recalled hearing a speaker at her La Jolla Sunrise Rotary Club meeting who said that, as an American, she was part of the 20 percent of the global population that was sharing 90 percent of the world's wealth. At the other end of the spectrum, another 20 percent of the world's population shares only 1 percent of the world's wealth.

The encounter was among Lindholm's motivations for forming the Foundation



COURTESY

Deborah Lindholm founded Foundation for Women after seeing poverty firsthand in Turkey.

for Women, which helps women through microcredit programs that provide very small business loans. In India, the foundation has reached more than 130,000 people. The foundation has much newer programs in Zambia, Niger, South Africa and Liberia, as well as a similar program for women in San Diego.

Microcredit is a concept first created by Mohammed Yunus, who earned the Nobel Peace Prize last year for his work in the field. Yunus, who Lindholm has met and worked with several times, is a Bangladeshi economist who returned to his home country after studying in the United States. Yunus was walking through a village and saw a woman cre-

ating beautiful baskets. He asked how much money she earned for the work and was stunned when she replied she only made two cents per day.

The woman had to borrow money for her materials, and by the time she paid her fees to the money lender, there was almost no profit left, Lindholm said.

"In essence, she's slave labor," Lindholm said. "(Dr. Yunus) asked how much she would need to afford her own materials, and she said it was the equivalent of 25 cents. He went to the local bank to ask them why they wouldn't loan her the money, and they said 'We don't loan money to people who don't have it.'"

Yunus found that there were almost 50

women in the village in the grip of the money lender, and they needed a total of less than \$30 to be free of him. Yunus loaned them the money himself, and was paid back in full. Those were the beginnings of Yunus' Grameen Bank, which in 30 years has given out more than \$6 billion in microcredit loans, with a repayment rate of 99 percent.

The average microcredit loan globally is between \$50 and \$100. With the Foundation for Women's San Diego microcredit program, the loans are larger, between \$250 and \$1,000. But Lindholm said the repayment rate is over 90 percent everywhere in the world.

"It's because women are mothers and they desperately want a better way of life for their children," Lindholm said. "If you give a woman a loan, she will give everything she has to make a business out of that."

The Foundation for Women is currently providing microcredit to about 75 women in San Diego, with a goal of 200 next year. The program currently relies on donors for its funding, but Lindholm said that once a microcredit program has about 2,500 clients, it becomes self-sufficient and no longer requires donor support.

Lindholm's work with the foundation has taken her all over the world. She recently sat down with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who became Africa's first female elected president when she was elected in Liberia.

Lindholm has called La Jolla her home for more than 30 years. When she is in town, she can often be spotted running along the local coastline, which she also serves to protect as a member of the La Jolla Town Council's Parks and Beaches Committee.

For more information on the Foundation for Women, visit www.foundationforwomen.org.