

The Okobos Story

Well, many have heard me say it before...I did not wake up one day and say, “This is the day that I am going to start a shoe company.” In fact, I knew nothing about the shoe industry!

What I did know something about: philanthropy. For me, there is no better mood ‘lift’ than generosity. Giving just feels good.

It has long been a goal of mine to get involved with a meaningful endeavor that would improve the quality of life for children and families living in adverse situations. As far back as I can remember, I’ve had an intuitive nudge from within—I have known for some time that my path of purpose, or life calling, is to help others. I can liken this feeling to a pre-programmed set of directions; I am simply hard-wired this way. I face each day with the absolute knowledge that I will be part of something larger than myself, something very special--that will improve the quality of life for many people.

As destiny would have it, I am married to the most unbelievably committed and enthusiastic man...I mean the: “put your sneakers close to the bed--because you’re ‘gonna hit the ground running each and every morning”—kind of man. Most would find a typical day in our life, admittedly, dizzying. Few, are the quiet, calm or still moments...and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

My husband, Tom, and I have a beautiful life together. We are a blended family...with his, hers, and ours...we have a total of six amazing children; the oldest is 20 and the youngest is 5. We, like most parents, are so grateful for our kids—as children truly are life’s most wonderful blessings. It is that “heart-bulging love” that I feel for my own kids that continually inspires me to look outward, trying to find meaningful and innovative ways that will empower the children who have lost hope, and give them access to the tools they need to rise above their current plight.

Tom and I always dream big; but not just for ourselves. We dream big for others as well. We are not the kind of people who sit and wait for opportunity to knock. We realize that for some families, there is no door on which opportunity *can* knock, because there isn’t a door—in fact, there isn’t a house. There are some mothers and fathers who must put their children to bed--knowing that their bellies ache with hunger. And still, in 2009, there are the parents who must watch, in agony, as their child withers away from a treatable disease; just because they did not have access to proper medical attention. These parents do not love their children any less than we love ours. And Tom and I cannot help but think about these families. ...Families that, because of an accident of geography or circumstance, are deprived the basic necessities of life. ...Families that, because of government bureaucracy, are overlooked by society. ...Families that, because of war or natural disaster, are displaced, and no longer feel like a family. ...Families that, because of their current situation, do not feel that there is reason to dream. ...These are the families that we dream for.

Tom and I believe in giving back and have always donated generously. My preferred method of giving was anonymous donations...but then I realized the power of collaboration.

In 2004-05, shortly after the birth of our youngest child, we collaborated with several area business owners from the home building industry and were able to raise and donate almost \$800,000 to the March of Dimes. There truly is strength in numbers. When people who share a common goal organize for action—it widens the impact of philanthropy.

Allow me to share a story about our youngest daughter. To meet her today, you would never guess that this ‘picture of health’ child wore an apnea monitor for the first fifteen months of her life because she would, at times, simply stop breathing. After many tests, our pediatrician and neonatologist told us that our daughter had apnea of prematurity and that time was the only ‘cure’ for this condition. The best way to prevent the dangerous lapses in breathing was to use an at home apnea monitor; which would sound an alarm every time her heart rate dropped-- giving us time to respond and stimulate her. This news brought about both feelings of relief and panic. I felt relief, because we did not receive a terrible medical diagnosis...and I felt panic, because the idea of relying on a ‘machine’ to monitor our child during this uncertain amount of time--sounded scary.

Immediately, I questioned the reliability of the apnea monitor... “What if the machine fails?” I decided that I could not go home with just one machine, I needed two—one to act as a back-up— just in case the other malfunctioned or missed something. The doctors were sympathetic to my request and ordered, in addition to the apnea monitor, a pulse oximeter for us to take home.

I share this very personal story because in that moment that I held our listless and dusky-colored, 3-day-old newborn in my arms, I became uncomfortably familiar with the most immense fear that a parent can feel—the incommunicable fear of losing a child. Even with easy access to modern medical facilities, wonderfully trained physicians, and the means to pay for additional medical technology; all of this and yet, I was still a mother who felt helpless.

Close your eyes and try to imagine, just for a moment, one day in the life of a parent in an undeveloped nation....

Facing economic difficulty in our own country and with the decline in the housing market, our building and development company was suffering the pinch of reduced land sales and fewer new home starts. Our accountant told us that we would have to drastically reduce our overhead in order to prepare for the possibility of tougher times ahead. One of the things on the list of cutbacks was the amount of our philanthropic giving. I still remember the tears that rolled down my cheeks, as my mind darted to the organization that had come to rely on my donation of winter clothing and Christmas gifts that I would, with happy heart, personally select and deliver each holiday season. It was

that December in 2006 that I set out on a philanthropic journey--determined to find a solution, non-related to the housing industry, which would allow me to make a positive and lasting difference.

Overcoming sameness to create something new takes courage, optimism and the certainty that there can be a better way. In order to make a difference, you must first believe that you can. I knew, like I know my name, that this was the path that I was destined to take. I began to pour myself into research. What I noticed at the time, among other things, was the work that was being done by humanitarian Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson. This dynamic duo has gained international respect (and mine!) for their tireless and ongoing efforts to assist people in developing countries, especially in Africa. And while they do not know it, their work was, in part, an inspiration, for Okobos...I knew that if I created a sustainable business model, I could also create social change.

Why footwear? I always tell people that it could have been can openers; it didn't matter what the product was. What mattered was creating a company that was about more than just profits. And while I understand that profit is the lifeline for any business; my aim was to build a business that placed value on our most precious resource---people. The company that I envisioned would be able to 'walk the walk', so to speak. And in January of 2007, I decided that footwear would be our vehicle for change. Walking symbolizes movement, advancing forward, and steps toward a goal. This metaphor echoed the values that would lay the groundwork for our new company.

I went searching for a company name and decided on Okobos. Okobos? Everyone asks. During one very late night web search I came across the word *okobos*. With Japanese etymology, the word is used to describe the very high, wooden shoes worn by a maiko, or geisha in training. I liked the way the word sounded; but more importantly, I liked that the word had three "o"s. The "o"s reminded me of the Zen circle and of the cycle of life. To me, the word 'okobos' took on a deeper, more figurative meaning and seemed to imply never-ending possibilities'. Okobos was the perfect name for our new company!

I wanted Okobos footwear to be able to provide, in addition to the benevolent component, a complimentary, self expressive component that would make it possible for individuals to customize their shoes. Consumers looking for more than just another pair of shoes might find emotional benefit in a pair of Okobos. With guidance from a Wisconsin based design firm; we developed a unique patent-pending "tri-lobe" system (the trademarked shape was derived from the three "o"s in **okobos**) that would provide the consumer with the ability to accessorize Okobos products with decorative or relevant charms and embellishments.

Product...check. Name...check. Next up...the business model. We're all familiar with the proverbial saying..."give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day; give him a fishing pole and he'll eat for a lifetime." As a social entrepreneur, I think about this saying and feel...the pole is *nice*...but let's also give this man a boat, a bountiful stream, etc...

Starting a new company during economically troubled times may not seem like good timing (or a good idea) for many people. But I thought it seemed like the ideal time—

almost as if the poor economy was a ‘cue’, beckoning me to take action. Fortunately, Tom agreed to follow my intuition. Unwavering and single-minded (mostly☺); we plowed forward—bootstrapping this idea to change the world, step-by-step, with our footwear.

This is the perfect opportunity for businesses to reinvent themselves. Over the past few years, the concept of social entrepreneurship and cause marketing has been gaining recognition and momentum. People are beginning to realize that even with the best of intentions; governments alone cannot address the complex issues facing today’s society. In my research I came across the Cone Millennial Cause Study of 2006, which indicated that 89% of Americans would purchase a brand (of comparable quality and price) that was associated with a good cause, over a brand that had no link to philanthropy. This study made me think about the powerful role the consumer plays in the marketplace. I thought, too, about the positive lead that the business and private sectors could take in building a better tomorrow. Instinctively, I knew the Okobos business model needed to focus on sustainable profitability and had to involve a synergy between the for-profit business practices of today and the increasing and emerging needs of the non-profit sector. Because of our work to raise money for the March of Dimes and the feelings of emotional reward that linger from that relationship---forming a company that would act as a link between the business, consumer and non-profit sectors seemed a natural fit.

After some consideration and consultation with our wonderful and supportive legal team, we decided that the best way to serve children and families was to start the Okobos Foundation---a 501 (c) (3) foundation. Every sale made by the Okobos Company represents a donation to the Okobos Foundation. In essence, The Okobos Company provides the base on which the Okobos Foundation can be built.

I believe most people are good and want to help others, and they will do so if they have access to a simple way to give. Okobos is about being good to your feet, being good to others and feeling good about it---all at the same time!

The Okobos way of doing business is about balancing profits and people. It is not about *being* the best; it is about *doing* the best—whenever and wherever we can. Now is a time when social and private sectors can and should work together to create change. My hope is for Okobos to become an impetus for social change. Along the way, I hope that other companies adopt ways similar to our brand of giving. This new mindset for business could provide the most promising path toward positive change during these unsettled times. We believe that if enough people and companies follow this path--- that together, we can make a measurable impact on the lives of many and perpetuate a movement of tangible change around the world. If enough people join us---we can turn this *path* of purpose into a *road*; one that leads to a happier destination and a better tomorrow.

At Okobos we believe that...

When a child is nourished in mind, body and spirit, he/she can reach his/her potential.

When you provide people and organizations with the means to give, their generosity will exceed your wildest dreams.

When we all take ownership in an idea, we can turn it into action.

When we all walk together, we can go farther than we ever dreamed.

Join us as we walk for a purpose!

~Michelle Juza