



June 6, 2012

An Exciting NEW Interview with Voss Foundation Executive Director, Kara Gerson

*Among the national leaders in mentoring we think of all the nonprofit organizations and charitable foundations giving back to communities that lack basic requirements of life, like water. While philanthropic arms of multinational brands like VOSS Water don't explicitly use the word "mentoring", Over My Shoulder Foundation sees mentorology written loud and clear all over their work. Today we are pleased to offer you an insider's glimpse into the life and work of Voss Foundation's Executive Director Kara Gerson. By sharing her personal experiences and reflections we hope that you are inspired to make a difference in your community today – through mentoring, or simply just doing good.*

-Dawn Carroll, Over My Shoulder Foundation Co-Founder and Executive Director

**Hi Kara, Thanks for joining us today. I think it's fair to say that, in America, we often forget to be truly grateful for the simple luxury of having our basic needs met. Yet, around the world, these basic needs are lacking in many communities. Voss Foundation was established in 2008 to provide clean water access to rural Sub-Saharan African communities. Since then it has helped to build 36 water access points in five countries, changing the lives of over 100,000 people.**

**Directly, Voss Foundation helps communities meet their water needs, but the work doesn't stop there. Clean water changes a community's relationship to women, the environment, the economy and hunger. You call it the "[Ripple Effect](#)". What are some of the most memorable ripples you've seen?**

Thank you so much for this opportunity – it's an honor to be interviewed here. I'm such a fan of the Over My Shoulder Foundation!

To answer your question, we've seen the most amazing ripple effects of our water projects, as we've watched our wells and water systems empower communities to grow in previously impossible ways. The first Voss Foundation site, Latakwen, Kenya, has grown from a small rural settlement to a real bustling town in three years. The school has doubled in size and they've just added a nursery school. The government built a health center and the economy is booming – it's becoming quite a trade center. All of this is because of access to clean water. As more children are surviving and thriving, they can go to school (especially girls). Their health center was nothing more than a shack until there was clean water on-site. In another project site, in Pel, Mali, we doubled women's average income by freeing them from the water-carrying cycle and installing an irrigation scheme in the women's cooperative garden. In the DR Congo, our well allowed bricks to be made – and built the first girls' school in the region. Now it serves the school, the toilets and sinks, the kitchen, the health center, the garden. I could go on forever.

Our founder says that water is an engine for growth and he is absolutely spot-on. It's just incredible to see how something so seemingly small affects all aspects of development from health, to education, to empowerment, politics, the economy; it's so much more than merely clean water versus dirty water. Water truly is the basis of life and development. Honestly, it's the ripple effect that really makes me passionate about the water issue in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**This picture is from the village of Ndonyo Nasipa in Samburuland, Kenya. Voss Foundation partnered with Milgis Trust to provide clean water to the village. After the tribe blessed the water, you were the first to turn on the tap. What were you thinking at that moment?**



Well, to be honest, I was hoping that it would work! About 20 minutes earlier I had switched on the solar pump and I was so nervous and excited! We built the well down by the lugga (the dried riverbed), and then pumped the water up over the rise to a tank, and then down into the village. This picture was taken after we had just come from blessing the well with the village elders on the other side of the ridge. I was there with about eight other women – donors plus our staff, and then our partners on the ground, and a whole host of Samburu people from all around who had come to see this miracle of water from a tap right in town. We hiked up and over from the lugga, just as all the women of Ndonyo Nasipa used to have to do every day to fetch water from a hand-dug ditch. So now we had built them a secured and covered well and were delivering the water practically to their doorsteps. I was so overwhelmed with emotion, as I always am opening a new water project, and getting so excited for the community, especially the women and the girls, for how this is going to change their lives. But there's also always that second – between when you turn the tap – and before the water starts flowing, where you think 'Oh gosh, I hope it works!'

**When Voss Foundation builds a new water system for a community in need, everyone in the village participates. Have you noticed community dynamics at work in those villages that would benefit our own communities here in the US if we adopted their attitudes and viewpoints?**

It is really difficult to compare the situation of a community without clean water, which is so desperate for access, with most communities in the States who are so fortunate. It's incredible when all the community members pitch in, and it makes me so happy to see, but part of that is, I think, human nature. We do hear that, in times of crises, American communities like Joplin, Missouri after the tornado, really do come together and remember what is important – they count their blessings and help their neighbors rebuild. What makes it an unequal comparison is that the communities in Africa to whom the Voss Foundation is bringing clean water access have, by definition, always been in a state of crisis because they've always lacked clean water. Once these African communities where we work have clean water and are living healthy and productive lives, they start to focus on the same things we do in the US – providing more for their families, helping their children get ahead in school, succeeding in business, finding happiness.

**Here's another mentoring lesson. Voss Foundation expands its ability to transform communities by providing access to clean water with numerous partners like [A Glimmer of Hope](#), [FACE Africa](#), [Georges Malaika Foundation](#), [Milgis Trust](#) and [Water.org](#). Can you talk about how partnerships, either personal or professional, empower your cause(s)?**

Yes! I think Voss Foundation is in a really special situation that differentiates us from many other water organizations, in that we partner with groups large and small and try to be totally transparent in sharing information.

We learn so much from organizations of varying sizes and situations that we can share with others. Our larger partners have budgets for research and can help teach us about new findings and best practices learned on a grand scale. On the other hand, our smaller partners have to be very resourceful and tend to be more dynamic – they show us how seemingly complicated issues can be dealt with simply and directly. I love educating our smaller partners with development and water sector news from our larger partners and, conversely, demonstrating to our larger partners that things can be accomplished faster and less expensively than they are used to. It's like a great mentoring feedback loop and Voss Foundation gets to be the conduit!

**Women are often responsible for gathering water. In a recent [USA Today] supplement about [investing in women and girls](#), you explain how access to clean water provides transformational experiences for those women. They can use time previously spent on water acquisition for empowering activities such as education and enterprise. Women are often our first mentors, pillars of strength and community innovators. Can you tell us about a woman (or women) who invested in, and mentored you?**

I had the most wonderful advisor when I was an undergrad, who was so much more than an academic advisor! She had an incredible knack for getting right to the heart of a problem, rather bluntly if necessary, but never stridently. I always left meetings with her with more confidence, because I really felt she had equipped me with tools to tackle what was ahead, whether it was school-related or personal.

Being a good mentor can be challenging – you have to strike the right balance between being sensitive and providing strong guidance. You have to listen and give thoughtful advice – you can't just nurse an ego or, alternatively, bark orders dismissively. You have to mentor based on your own experiences without making it about yourself. As a mentee you have to be picky. Your challenge is double: you need a mentor whom you admire – whose advice you'll take – but also who is devoted to helping you find success in a meaningful way on your own terms.

I have also had some great male mentors in my career, men who have cared about both my personal and professional accomplishment. I am fortunate to have such men as bosses in my current job and have had in previous positions as well. I don't think women necessarily need female mentors or that men need male mentors – I think it's most important for the relationship to work for all parties.

**Voss Foundation is hosting its 2nd annual [Women Helping Women](#) event in Boston on June 20<sup>th</sup>. Women Helping Women has brought together more than 400 champions of clean water in eight countries to raise nearly 200,000 dollars for water projects. The focus of the celebration is on global female cooperation. Can you speak about what you envision for the world in an ideal scenario of global female cooperation?**

Studies have shown that gender inequity is a lead indicator for a host of other societal problems like terrorism, endemic poverty, depressed educational attainment and so forth. In developed countries, we are extraordinarily fortunate that the women before us made such strides and opened so many doors for us – it is now our responsibility to help women around the world achieve such parity as a matter both of personal interest and of global security.

I guess what I envision is a world in which women are neither silently simmering in oppression, nor competing to be the token quota-fillers. I would like to see women show each other how gender is not a barrier to achievement and to stand up for each other when that is called into question. Because women know about the specific challenges other women face, it is our responsibility to both be an example and to help. That's why Women Helping Women is so important – it addresses the need of clean water access, which helps the women in our beneficiary communities, as it shows the women we are helping what is possible with female cooperation and empowerment.

**Leadership puts individuals in powerful positions where they are able to influence the thoughts, motivations and aspirations of their teams. In a sense, leaders mentor their teams and their causes to greatness. What empowers and mentors you as a leader as you fulfill your role as the Executive Director of Voss Foundation?**

I am so inspired by the women in the communities where we work. If I ever feel overwhelmed or face a tough situation, I think about how amazing the women are who we work with, how they spend their time carrying water and firewood and raising their families, and livestock and crops, all in such adverse conditions, and yet they still achieve so much. Thinking about that reminds me how privileged I am, and helps put things in perspective.

Additionally, as I said, I am fortunate to work for a real visionary in our Founder and President, and have the support of our wonderful Treasurer. They help me chart the course for the Voss Foundation, planning for the long term so that everyone involved is on the same page, working towards the same goals. Their leadership really helps me to lead – they set an excellent example and provide great encouragement. I am also lucky to have a fantastic staff to work with in New York and Oslo with our European representatives, to whom I am able to give a great deal of free rein. It's a wonderful feeling to be supported by both your bosses and staff!

**Thanks again, Kara, for joining us to talk about your work with Voss Foundation and mentoring.**