

# Spence School

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## The Ripple Effects of Clean Water

Spence alumna Kara Gerson '00 spoke to a gathering of Spence students, parents, alumnae and faculty to discuss her role as Executive Director of The Voss Foundation (a nonprofit with the mission of providing access to clean water to communities in sub-Saharan Africa) as well as the journey that brought her there.

Gerson introduced and explained what she calls "The Ripple Effect," which describes not only the broader impacts of access to clean water in developing regions of sub-Saharan Africa, but also how one person's subtle or small action can affect the cycle, benefiting the lives of those far away, especially women. In most of the communities The Voss Foundation serves, the primary responsibility of securing drinking water falls on the shoulders of females. Many, beginning in childhood, are expected to travel great distances under extreme duress. That burden takes a physical toll and ultimately leaves little time for many of the daily activities we take for granted, such as education. To illustrate this hardship, two Spence students volunteered to transport a heavy, half-full bucket of water across the room. "Now imagine a 10 mile walk, for eight hours, with 40 gallons of water," Gerson said, putting this responsibility into perspective for audience members.

Gerson also shared a distinguishing element of The Voss Foundation's approach: the organization forms partnerships with local organizations in the communities it helps. This, she emphasized, allows for a specific and unique solution to each individual case. Currently, the Foundation has initiatives in Kenya, Ethiopia, Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, and most recently, the Kingdom of Swaziland. Each site comes with its very own set of challenges, and thus these partnerships allow for a customized program to better meet those needs. As an example, The Voss Foundation's Women Helping Women project in Swaziland, initiated in 2012, is working with a local partner to build five wells and 30 latrines for 6,300 people in two communities.

Similar to the incredible expedition many of these native women embark on to retrieve clean water, Gerson expressed her belief in the philosophy that "life is a journey, not a destination" -- and she has applied this to her career. She credits Spence and the Socratic method employed by her teachers, who persistently asked "why" and "how," as the driving force behind her continued sense of curiosity and adventure, allowing her to leave behind a more traditional career path to spearhead what has become a remarkable endeavor. She also offered encouraging words for current students and alumnae regarding the opportunities available in international development and the nonprofit sector. She told the girls that the chances to make a difference are limitless. "It starts with a drop," Gerson said. "It starts with you."

*A.M. Perspectives is a series of informative talks by members of The Spence School community. Our early-morning speakers generously share their expertise and insights with parents, faculty, administrators and students. With a focus on a range of stimulating topics, A.M. Perspectives offers an opportunity to share with one another the richness of resources within our community. Come, listen, converse and be a part of what makes Spence a place of ideas fueled by a community of learners of all ages.*

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