

A School & A Future For Blind Children by Knowledge@Wharton

Sabriye Tenberken and Paul Kronenberg are co-founders of a school for blind teenagers in Tibet. Tenberken, who was born in Germany and has been blind since the age of 12, attended the University of Bonn and studied, among other things, the cultures of Central Asia. From there, she traveled around China, Nepal — where she met Kronenberg — and Tibet, where they started their school, Braille Without Borders.

Tenberken and Kronenberg were also members of an expedition that led blind children up a 23,000-foot mountain next to Mt. Everest. The trek was featured in an award winning documentary, Blindsight. And in 2009, they started an educational and training institute in Kerala, India, called Kanthari International, whose goal is to help disadvantaged people become social entrepreneurs.

An edited transcript of the conversation appears below.

Knowledge@Wharton: Sabriye and Paul: Welcome to Wharton. It's very hard to summarize everything you have done, but can you start by telling me about Kanthari and the motivation for setting it up?

Sabriye Tenberken: Kanthari is a leadership training center for social visionaries from all around the world. These are very, very special social visionaries, people who have overcome adversity in their lives, who have been affected by social ill and who want to create an ethical social change in their regions and countries through, for example, schools, campaigns, movements and so on.

Knowledge@Wharton: Paul, can you give me some examples of how successful these students have been?

Paul Kronenberg: In the last five years, we trained 98 visionaries from 35 countries around the world, and people went back to their countries to start social projects. We have women in East Africa fighting the killing of albinos, who are being killed and their body parts sold as good luck charms.... We have a lady from Kenya who is fighting female circumcision. We have ex-child soldiers from Liberia and Sierra Leone now supporting street children — most of them former child soldiers — and teaching them skills other than killing people. So there are a lot of different areas we are working in. We work with blindness. We work with people who are handicapped. We have people who are affected by wars, people affected by discrimination. They come to us for a seven-month course and [then] go back and create social impact within their own community.

Knowledge@Wharton: So you are definitely involved in the whole area of social entrepreneurship, which is a pretty hot term these days. What have you found works in this area, and what doesn't work?

Tenberken: First of all, I have a problem with the term social entrepreneurship because people say only business helps to make the world a better place. I don't really agree. We feel that there are many, many other methods and tools that need to be focused on to make a sustainable difference. People need to create mindset changes through, for example, training centers and schools. A school cannot always be run as a business — or should ... be run as a business. A campaign is not always a business. So I think it's very important to also focus on other skills, such as social advocacy initiatives, inventions and art. Art for social change [is] also very, very important.

Knowledge@Wharton: Paul, what does it take for an individual to be a successful social entrepreneur?

Kronenberg: I think one of the most important [components] of being successful is drive — and an inner drive. If you look at the history of the world and how sustainable social change has happened, it always came from within — from within society — never from outside. So we looked at people who have a drive. Where do people get a drive from? If somebody has been affected by social ill in such a bad way that they at some point come up and say, "Now, stop. Now I've got to do something" — we call that the Gandhi moment.

"I have a problem with the term social entrepreneurship because people say only business helps to make the world a better place."—Sabriye Tenberken

Tenberken: Or the pinching point.

Kronenberg: Or the pinching point. So Gandhi was kicked out of the train in South Africa. He had a first class ticket, but because of his skin color, he was kicked out. At that moment he became the Gandhi we know today. This is what we look for in any individual we train at Kanthari.

Tenberken: One thing about Kanthari: Kanthari is a very, very small chili in Kerala. It grows in the backyards of society — in the backyards of Kerala's yards — and it's very small, but highly spicy, and it is medicinal. So it purifies the blood. It makes you very, very alert. It lowers the blood pressure. So it's very healthy for the people. We see Kanthari as a symbol for a new type, an old and new type, of leader — somebody who has fire in the belly, who has spice in their action and who is able or has the guts to challenge the status quo, someone who comes up with innovative and new solutions for old and new problems. And, therefore, we call these leaders Kantharis.

Knowledge@Wharton: Some people might say that the business community has co-opted social entrepreneurship — or tried to co-opt it in a way that has good connotations and bad connotations. But you do see a role for the business community in this area. Is that correct, Paul?

Kronenberg: Yes. Business definitely plays a role. Kanthari's logo has five colors. We looked at five colors because there is one particular color — orange — that [represents]

the person who has a business mindset because [he or she] uses business to create social change. But we have other colors as well. The green one is for initiators. They are people who start up projects like schools and training centers. These always cost money.

But ... unfortunately, in the world today, the return on investment is measured in one dimension only, and that is money. What we see is a return on investment in a better world. So if people want to invest in a green Kanthari — that is, someone who sets up a project where people from the margins of society are trained — if that results in a better world in the long term, it is a good investment.

We have a yellow Kanthari, which is technology. We feel that everybody who needs technology to take part in society — like, for Sabriye, a cane or a Braille typewriter or speech synthesizer — that should come at low or no cost. So that is a sharing of technology.

The orange one is the business. Then we have the red ones. These are the advocates — the Gandhis, the Sabriyes, people who fight for rights or fight against injustice. Then we have the purple ones, and these are the artists, the stars. In India, there is a famous person — Shahrukh Khan. Shahrukh says, “dish, dish” — and everybody buys a dish to watch TV. Can you imagine if he would say, “solar, solar”? Then there would be solar energy in two days.

Knowledge@Wharton: Sabriye, you have made headlines for many things. You rode into Tibet on a horse long after you became blind, you set up with Paul the school for Tibetan blind children and you have taken a leading role in the documentary [Blindsight]. All along, your philosophy has been to never consider blind people as victims — to never consider that they are anything less than sighted people. How difficult has that been to sustain, and has the prejudice against blind people lightened up at all?

Tenberken: I have the feeling that, in Tibet, there is a change because our kids are going out with their little kiddie canes, and they demonstrate that they have a role to play in the society. So they really make a difference. When people used to come... from the outside and saw a blind person, they would shout out [words that mean] “blind fool.” Nowadays, these kids they just turn around and say, “Well, can you read and write in the dark? Can you speak three languages fluently?” And, of course, they cannot.

These kids are actually confident enough to show to the world that blindness is not necessarily a disability. It can be a quality of life. I will give you one example. Kumi was a little boy sitting in the courtyard smiling from ear to ear. We said, “Hey, Kumi, what’s up?” And he said, “I am so happy.” I said, “Why are you happy?” He said: “I am happy because I am blind.”

Now when you say this to a sighted person, he says no, this is not possible. But this little boy — he knows. He is the only one in his family who can read and write. He is the only one in his village who can speak three languages fluently — Tibetan, Chinese and English. And he is the only one in his whole region who can [use] the Internet and who knows that the world is round. This — despite the fact, or actually because of the fact, that he is blind — creates a change in the confidence of the blind but also in society [so that people now] understand we should concentrate on the possibilities, not necessarily on the disabilities.

Knowledge@Wharton: So this could be true for any disability — if you are deaf, blind, have trouble walking....

Kronenberg: Absolutely.

Tenberken: Absolutely. There are so many disabilities that we don't even see — people who are scared to talk to outsiders, people who are scared to go into the city [and so forth].

Knowledge@Wharton: Sabriye, why did you study Central Asia when you were a student? What was it that first got you interested in going there?

Tenberken: Mainly it was the urge to have an adventurous life, and also to escape from Germany where everybody knew what I could do and what I could not do. I wanted to test my own limits. I wanted to overcome these limits and maybe get even a step higher. For me, Tibet was probably the most adventurous place to be. And, yeah, I love horses. I love mountains. I love kayaking — whitewater kayaking — and that was a very egotistical reason why I studied Tibetology at first. Later, responsibility for this project [and] the enthusiasm for creating something for blind kids came along with it.

Knowledge@Wharton: So you yourself had the drive that you look for in all the people who come to Kanthari.

Tenberken: Yes. That's right.

Knowledge@Wharton: The documentary Blindsight was amazing, and I hope everyone has a chance to watch it. What I thought was so impressive was how you were able to chronicle the lives of these six Tibetan kids along with the challenges that you all faced climbing up 23,000 feet. I still am not sure where the name Blindsight came from. Can you explain that?

Tenberken: Blindsight is actually something that some people have. It is a shortcut in the brain where the visual cortex thinks that one still sees, despite the fact that this person doesn't actually see [at all]. I most likely have blindsight, because what happens is that now, when we are sitting here in this room and I look at you, I actually see you sitting there. But, in fact, I don't see anything. People can test it. I don't see a thing. I don't see light and dark. But I see you sitting there. I see long blonde hair. I see that you wear glasses. Well, if this is true or not, I don't care.

Knowledge@Wharton: The glasses part is true.

Tenberken: I don't really care.... It doesn't matter. But my visual cortex thinks that everything that comes into my mind from the outside — whether it is acoustically or through smell or through touch — is actually a picture that I got through my eyes. And this is called blindsight.

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Kronenberg: I can add maybe one anecdote to that. Blind people are not disappointed by reality — as long as they don't know reality. So when we first met, Sabriye thought I had dark hair — black hair — from my voice, from [how I sounded].

Tenberken: And blue eyes.

Kronenberg: And blue eyes. She likes dark hair and blue eyes. So she went home and took a lot of pictures [back with her], some of which I happened to be in. Her parents and friends asked, “Who is the blond guy in your pictures?” And she said, “What guy? I don’t know. He must have run in front of my camera.” So then half a year later we met, and Sabriye said, “Well, Paul, you were there. Maybe you know who this blond guy is in these pictures.” And I said, “Well, that’s me.” And then she was very disappointed.

Knowledge@Wharton: In all of these initiatives that you have undertaken, what has been your most difficult challenge? Paul, maybe you could tell me first, and then I will ask Sabriye.

Kronenberg: I think one of the most difficult challenges [is] people who don’t believe in big dreams [or] believe in our dreams. This is a big obstacle for progress in our world — people who don’t believe in the dreams of others and who say dreaming has a negative connotation. I have to tell you just a small anecdote on that as well because our students, when they first came to us, they came from dark rooms. They were locked out of society. We thought, “How could we give them hope for the future?” because every person has to have that.

We thought long and hard, and came up with something beautiful: We have started a dream factory. We asked our students, what is it that you want to do? And this does not [apply only to] blind kids. It is for everyone in the world. What do you want to do? Not your parents, your brothers, your sisters — you. It is your life. You get to work for 40 years. Can you imagine doing something that you don’t love doing? You become one of the “Thank God it’s Friday” people. You don’t want to be that.

So we gave this to our students, and one week later, we asked them to share their dreams. Nobu is eight years old. He has a big smile on his face. He says, “I want to become a taxi driver.” The only problem is that he can’t see. But if you look at all the taxi drivers anywhere in the world, you would think they were blind anyway. So we never say that something is not possible. That’s why it is Braille Without Borders. That’s the border — the mental border. So we said, “Fantastic.” Two years later, we asked Nobu, “What about your dream?” And he said with a smile on his face, “Well, now I know that I can’t become a taxi driver because that’s rather dangerous, but I could set up a taxi company and run it.” Ten years old. That’s what it is about. I think that’s what our biggest problem was — that people didn’t believe in our dream. Of course, then you have to be stubborn, and you have to find a team to work together and make it happen.

Tenberken: In Kerala, at Kanthari, we have a global dream factory — a springboard for dreamers or for social visionaries who create their visions. We are all believers in these visions. Therefore, we select them — carefully, of course.... But the great thing is we encourage people to dream, and we give them tools to realize their dreams. We have international experts who are there to teach or to catalyze them — to push them forward to make their dreams come true.

Sometimes [you hear the words]: “Oh, it’s not possible. Stay on the ground. Don’t grab for the stars.” But here, at Kanthari, people can say, “Just bite into a Kanthari. You know that a small chili can make a huge difference.” This is what they learn in our Kerala center.

Knowledge@Wharton: But in terms of specific challenges, is funding difficult? Is it hard getting people to buy in to the project? What is it?

Kronenberg: Funding, of course, is a major challenge. As I mentioned before, the return on investment for a lot of people is money. What Sabriye and I strongly believe is that a return on investment is a better world — because if you look at the state of the world, we are in bad shape. There is plenty of money. There are plenty of resources. But they have not been used in such a way that the return on investment comes in the form of access to clean drinking water, access to health care, access to food, access to elder care, access to education.

“Unfortunately, in the world today, the return on investment is measured in one dimension only, and that is money. What we see is a return on investment in a better world.”-Paul Kronenberg

We can shoot something — right now there is a probe that went to an asteroid. We can do all that. We shoot rovers to Mars. And we can't solve these problems? So if people are in a position to invest in a better future by supporting, for example, Kanthari or any other NGO in their neighborhood, that would be a fantastic thing.

The second way we can be helped is for people to talk about the [fact] that we are [in Kerala] — that we have [Kanthari] — because we have people from around the world who never had a chance to go to Wharton or to other big places.... If people can help spread the news that Kanthari exists, and if they know about anyone anywhere in the world who has a plan for social change, link them to our website — Kanthari.org — and they can apply for the seven-month course.

Tenberken: For those who cannot start their own project but who want to help others — [they could consider] a scholarship, for example. [It would be] an investment not in one individual, but in the start of a project. And for that, we have a bank account in America.

Kronenberg: We have a 501(c)(3) status.

Knowledge@Wharton: Sabriye, you have received so many different awards from so many different institutions and individuals including, just to name a few, the World Economic Forum, the president of Germany, Time magazine, the government of India. One year you were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. I am guessing that these awards don't mean that much to you, but if you had to pick one that did mean a lot, what would it be?

Tenberken: Of course, awards are always good to show that our projects and our ideas are taken seriously. Therefore, I was actually quite happy about this one award that the Chinese government gave us. With this award, they said that we belonged to the 15 most influential people — or influential foreigners — in the last 30 years.

Kronenberg: In China.

Tenberken: In China, yes. So that was an award that actually showed us that they not only believe in women, but actually they believe that people who are handicapped or people who have so-called disabilities — who are blind — can be influential and can be contributors in a huge society like China. I think this could be done much, much more often in other countries as well — [thereby] showing, through these awards to disabled people, that they believe in the qualities and in the importance of people with disabilities.

Knowledge@Wharton: My last question for you is — I don't want to be so crass as to ask about a five-year plan or 10-year plan — but I will ask, what lies ahead? Where do you see yourselves going with all of this? Where do you see your energies being concentrated? Are there new projects? Is the idea to expand where you are now? What is out there?

Kronenberg: We have set Braille Without Borders in Tibet. We have set up Kanthari in the south of India. Most of our participants in Kanthari come from Africa. That is where we are now looking to create another campus. Maybe it is going to be Kanthari Africa. [Maybe] it is going to be Kanthari Asia. Maybe there will be a Kanthari America one day. But the first one — the first focus — I think will be Kanthari Africa in the next few years.

Knowledge@Wharton: Sabriye, is all this possible?

Tenberken: Absolutely, because it is another adventure for me. I have never been to Africa. I have a lot of African friends and, of course, a lot of African students — participants — who were at our center. And I love the people. I love the cultures. Yes, it is definitely a new adventure. But, of course, we also will have one leg in India for sure.