

A LITTLE COMPANY MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE

Told by Kevin Berger

Laura Scher could barely contain her excitement. The thirty-seven-year-old chief executive officer of Working Assets had a \$50,000 check to present to Planned Parenthood's president, Pamela Maraldo, at their headquarters in New York, and she was standing next to women's rights leader Gloria Steinem, one of her heroes.

The check was one of thirty-six donations totaling \$1 million made by the company to nonprofit organizations in 1993, but to Scher it represented much more. Eight years earlier, as the one and only employee of Working Assets, Laura had dreamed of the day when her "little company" could make a big contribution to a cause she "believed in with her heart and soul." As Laura handed over the check, her nervous excitement gave way to a beaming smile. Her dream had come true.

"I was so proud when we gave \$55,000 to Planned Parenthood, especially since AT&T had abruptly stopped contributing to them," says Laura today. "Our donation has helped Planned Parenthood keep up its great work for women's health and freedom. We also showed the world that you really can create a successful business *and* be committed to social change."

Laura has turned Working Assets from an idealistic vision into a \$140-million company. Founded in 1985, the long-distance, wireless, and credit-card company was designed to give customers the opportunity to

contribute to social change. Today Working Assets donates ten cents of every credit-card purchase and 1 percent of all long-distance bills and wireless charges to nonprofit groups.

Remembering the excitement of its inception, Laura says, “It’s such a perfect product: Just by people talking on the phone or buying a book, we can build a community of kindred spirits with enormous impact.”

Over time, Working Assets has built such a community. Since 1985, it has raised \$30 million for nonprofit groups. In 2001 alone it generated over \$5 million. Practicing what Laura calls “democracy in action,” their customers nominate the organizations they want to receive the donations, and then vote on how much money each one receives.

“Working Assets has created a wonderful vehicle for supporting social change,” remarks Pamela Maraldo. “Their contribution helped us increase access to reproductive health care for women, troubled teens, the sexually abused, and the underserved. We were particularly grateful to be the highest vote-getter on a long list of very effective and worthwhile grantees. To us, it’s a vote of confidence from the American people.”

Working Assets customers can also increase support to nonprofit groups by “rounding up” their monthly phone bills to the highest dollar. In this way, in 1999 they sent extra money—more than sixty thousand dollars—to the humanitarian group Kosovo Women’s Fund, which aids women and their families in Kosovo and neighboring countries. Laura says she was impressed that “a simple message on a bill like ‘Round up your check’ can change the lives of people who live half a world away.”

Working Assets also helps its customers stay informed. Each month’s

phone bill contains copy highlighting two crucial issues, explaining what's at stake and whom to contact to make a difference. If you have something to say, all you have to do is pick up the phone and speak your mind, and Working Assets will pick up the tab. Or for a small fee, the company will send a "Citizen Letter" on your behalf. By flooding Congress and corporate boardrooms with their calls and letters, customers have brought attention to sweatshop conditions, wasteful government spending, and America's vanishing wilderness.

Laura always wanted to "work for a company that treated its employees well and was conscientious about the environment and developing countries." But her ambitions cast her as a lone wolf among her classmates at Harvard Business School. After all, Laura had graduated in the top 5 percent of her MBA class at the height of the greedy eighties. Even before she graduated, she was wined and dined by recruiters from Fortune 100 corporations, who promised her salaries of over \$100,000 a year, right out of school.

"But I didn't want to sell laundry detergent," she says. "And I didn't want to work on Wall Street. I wanted something valuable to come out of my work. We don't need one more company to figure out how to invent one more breakfast cereal. We need to figure out how to solve some of the world's problems."

So, instead of "sitting in an office on Wall Street with a view of the Hudson River," Laura and her husband furnished a dusty one-room office with an old desk and a filing cabinet. "We didn't have enough money to pay the landlord to renovate the space," she says, "so we had to live with orange shag carpet and bright orange bookcases. But I did

talk them into at least cleaning the curtains.” As its chief executive officer, Laura’s challenge has been to demonstrate to vendors that Working Assets is legitimate. The banks that issue its credit cards and the major phone companies that lease its fiberoptic cables are tough business folks. “People in the business world have a hard time believing that consumers will make buying decisions based on their social convictions,” she says. “But time after time we’ve convinced them that people will use a credit card and choose a phone company based on their beliefs.” Indeed, Working Assets’ annual revenues recently topped \$140 million. As Laura guides the company forward, she wants the company to reach an annual donation budget of \$10 million.

Laura is proud of the success she has achieved on a “road less traveled” and credits her parents with teaching her that “responsibility means taking your social values into the workplace.” Her father, who ran a water-based chemical company, and her mother, an economics professor, taught her to have “concern for others and the world around us, instead of being self-absorbed,” she says.

Laura wants to pass on to her children the same values she learned from her parents. “I want them to know that they can do anything they want with their lives,” she says. “And I want them to understand that not everyone has the basic comforts of life. So it’s up to the rest of us to create a more just and equitable world.”

It is by spending oneself that one becomes rich.

SARAH BERNHARDT

To join Working Assets, call 800-788-8588, or visit their Web site,
www.workingassets.com.