

# A multimedia route to funding children in need

**PHILANTHROPY**

Maya Ajmera has devised a unique line in brand marketing to help finance her non-profit, writes **Lauren Foster**

**I**t was on a crowded railway platform in Bhubaneswar, India, that Maya Ajmera had what she calls her "moment of obligation."

"In the midst of the dust and sunlight and trains and people there were about 25 children learning to read and write and there was a teacher in the middle of the circle, giving flash cards, teaching these kids literacy," she says. "I was amazed by her energy and also by the extraordinary passion of these children wanting to learn, something we take for granted in the developed world."

Ms Ajmera walked over to the teacher and asked how much it cost to run such a school. It was about \$400 a year. "I'll never forget it, it was this extraordinary idea," she says of that chance encounter 17 years ago. "What occurred in my head was: 'How do we get small amounts of capital to worthy grassroots organisations like this and help them be sustainable and help them scale or replicate or transform their ideas?' Small amounts of money can do big things."

Inspired by the "platform" school, Ms Ajmera returned to the US and enrolled in Duke University's Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy where she earned a master's degree in public policy. In 1994, aged 25, she founded The Global Fund for Children, a non-profit focused on vulnerable children and youth.

It would be three more years before the organisation was ready to start giving away money. During that time Ms Ajmera self-published GFC's first photo-illustrated book, *Children from Australia to Zimbabwe*, and then secured its national release through an innovative partnership with Charlesbridge Publishing, a for-profit children's book publisher that specialises in multicultural and educational materials for children.

Armed with \$3,000 from book sales, Ms Ajmera's fledgling organisation was ready to begin making grants. In July 1997, she telephoned Inderjit Khurana, the schoolteacher who had created the platform school she stumbled on during her travels, and asked her to send in a proposal for a grant to support three schools. The Ruchika Social Service Organization ([www.ruchika.org](http://www.ruchika.org)) became one of GFC's first grantees, with a cheque for \$1,200.

To date, GFC has awarded \$1.7m in small grants to more than 300 community-based organisations around the world. For the fiscal year ended June 30 2008, it gave away \$3.2m. This year it plans to increase its grant-making to more than \$4m and hopes to scale to \$10m by 2014.

What sets GFC apart from other small grant-making organisations is its strategy: increasingly, funders are demanding that non-profits and foundations develop metrics to evaluate the impact of their work. GFC, like its peers, has not been

immune to that pressure. "We're very good at telling the story of our work with our grantee partners, but there's got to be more than just anecdotes and images," says Ms Ajmera. "We had numbers but we really needed to have some sort of rigorous way of measuring [success]."

With the financial support and encouragement of Peter Briger, a principal at Fortress Capital and a GFC board member, the organisation set out to develop a way to assess its work with its grantee partners. The project took about two years and cost more than \$450,000.

The organisation has a dual approach: the grant-making programme gives small amounts (\$5,000 to \$20,000) to community-based organisations that work with vulnerable children and youth; and its global media ventures division creates and promotes books, films and documentary photography that help children and adults understand and appreciate the multicultural world in which they live.

"We're a hybrid," Ms Ajmera says. "We think we've combined the arts in a very interesting way."

One of the documentaries GFC funded is *War Child*, by first-time director/producer C. Karim Chrohog. The award-winning film tells the story of Emmanuel Jal, a hip-hop artist and former child soldier in Sudan. Ms Ajmera, GFC's president, loved the story and decided to take a gamble on Mr Chrohog.

"We're a grant-maker and make bets on grantee organisations, we make bets on photography fellows, why not make bets on film-makers?" she says.

"A lot of people are watching documentary films to get their news. And there are so many issues we are working on for vulnerable children from child soldiers to child trafficking and prostitution to child labour, children out of school, children who work but go to school, girls' education, the issues of boys globally."

"What better way to tell a story than by a documentary film that tells a story about



Maya Ajmera: her life-changing moment came on an Indian railway platform Haynes Sadman

the issues we care about?" But telling important stories is only part of the reason why GFC, which has offices in Washington DC and London, is interested in funding documentaries. Another is their marketing

## Books, films and photography are crucial to building The Global Fund for Children brand

potential; films offer a subtle, yet powerful way for the organisation to get its brand in front of a wider audience. In exchange for funding, Ms Ajmera insists that GFC's name appear at the beginning of the film.

This acumen and vision is

not surprising, given that she had self-published a book and set up a non-profit organisation before turning 30. Over the years, her warmth, gumption and charm has won GFC friends in high places, starting with a serendipitous encounter with Richard "Dick" Fisher, the late chairman emeritus of Morgan Stanley.

The two met in 1994 when Ms Ajmera, who was raised in North Carolina, was upgraded to first class and sat next to him on a flight from Raleigh to New York City. As she tells it, they spoke all the way to New York. Ms Ajmera mentioned she had just started a non-profit organisation and was writing a children's book and he asked her more about the book. When they were getting off the aircraft, Mr Fisher said: "Maya, if I can ever help you, please get in

touch with me," and handed her his business card.

She kept it and in November 1997 wrote to Mr Fisher to say that *Children from Australia to Zimbabwe*, the book they had discussed, had been released nationally. She later gave him a copy and he and his wife became angels to GFC. He also introduced her to many Wall Street titans. Today GFC counts John Whitehead, former chairman of Goldman Sachs, and Robert Steel, chief executive of Wachovia, among its friends.

While GFC has many loyal supporters, Ms Ajmera worries that the deepening financial crisis will hamper fundraising. Yet she is determined that GFC broaden its reach. "The question for me is: 'How do I continue to tap new sources of philanthropic capital?' People have less in their pocketbooks, from the \$100 donor to the million-dollar donor."

Ms Ajmera hopes the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), which starts today, will enable GFC to get out its message. When her organisation announced its "Under Eight Initiative" at last year's meeting, it attracted the attention of several funders, including the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Netherlands. In June the foundation gave GFC a grant for a "resource officer" to help gain additional resources for its grantee partners in the US Initiative.

"We feel at GFC we have a moral obligation to grow and to get more support to innovative grassroots organisations out there, small amounts of money can do very big things," she says. "I'm a big believer in this idea of small is beautiful."

**WEALTH ONLINE**  
The Short View  
Watch John Authers, FT investment editor, for a unique daily take on investing  
[www.ft.com/shortview](http://www.ft.com/shortview)

## Numbers plus anecdotes aim to tell whole story

The Global Fund for Children celebrates its 15th anniversary next year. Over the years it has had its share of successes – but there have also been some disappointments.

Maya Ajmera, president of GFC, is pragmatic about the lessons learned. "Failure is part of the investment process," she says.

Admitting failure is part of a continuing shift toward more accountability in the non-profit sector.

Necessitating funders are demanding that non-profits and foundations develop metrics to evaluate the impact of their work. GFC, like its peers, has not been

immune to that pressure.

"We're very good at telling the story of our work with our grantee partners, but there's got to be more than just anecdotes and images," says Ms Ajmera. "We had numbers but we really needed to have some sort of rigorous way of measuring [success]."

With the financial support and encouragement of Peter Briger, a principal at Fortress Capital and a GFC board member, the organisation set out to develop a way to assess its work with its grantee partners. The project took about two years and cost more than \$450,000.

The efforts paid off. GFC has developed eight key indicators, including its "organisational capacity index", which assesses grantees' organisational development over time. Others include return on grant investment and data that show tangible results of a grantee's programme, such as successful transit to the next level of schooling.

"I think we are building the field here and I think other organisations can use the GFC capacity building score," Ms Ajmera says. "I want to brand this and see other foundations and grant-making organisations using it."