

Jim Ziolkowski

President, CEO, and Founder of buildOn
Stamford, Connecticut

“When [youth] realize they can make a difference in the lives of others, they raise their expectations”



Photo by B.W. Cary

In 1990, Jim Ziolkowski was a college grad backpacking around the world. Stopping at a small Nepalese mountain village to dry off from the monsoon rains, he found himself in the midst of a two-day celebration for the opening of a small school the villagers had built.

The image stuck with him, as did the poverty he saw during his travels. “[It] really woke me up to the realities of our world and, to a large extent, to our responsibilities to lift up others,” he says.

These opposing images — one, wrenching poverty, and the other, joy for the blessing of a school — kept coming back to Ziolkowski after he returned home. He soon quit his job in finance at General Electric and created the nonprofit buildOn. His refusal to give up on the risky venture earned him the grant money (awarded by GE and others) he needed to stay afloat, and today, buildOn is fulfilling its mission.

“We mobilize urban youth to literally change their communities and change the world,” says Ziolkowski. “We empower them through after-school programs where they do intensive local community service, working... with elders, homeless people, younger children, folks with disabilities. At the same time, we take them overseas to build schools in developing countries.”

To have a school built, a community signs a covenant, committing themselves to providing the labor to build the school — which Ziolkowski says empowers and unites the community — and to providing equal education for girls. Follow-through is monitored by buildOn, which also offers literacy classes for the parents.

According to Ziolkowski, buildOn is now working in 118 U.S. high schools and has built 364 schools worldwide. The students have contributed nearly 700,000 hours of community service, often transforming themselves in the process. Despite attending schools with some of the lowest graduation rates, 95 percent of students involved with buildOn in the United States go on to college.

“When they realize they can make a difference in the lives of others, and impact people on a global scale,” Ziolkowski explains, “they raise their expectations, their horizons are broadened, and they step up.”

But even as the founder who has made all this possible, Ziolkowski’s view of his own role is a humble one. “I feel like all I’m doing is what I’m supposed to do,” he says. “Right now there are thousands of people around the world building buildOn schools, and thousands more kids across the U.S. are mobilizing. They’re the heroes. They’re the ones who are living the Gospel. Whether they’ve read the Gospel or not, they’re living it. I’m just blessed to be in this position.”

Nominated by Carrie Pena of buildOn

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