

## NCWIT Interview with Gillian Caldwell

**BIO:** *Gillian Caldwell is the Executive Director of WITNESS (www.witness.org), which uses the power of video to open the eyes of the world to human rights abuses. By partnering with local organizations around the globe, WITNESS empowers human rights defenders to use video as a tool to shine a light on those most affected by human rights violations, and to transform personal stories of abuse into powerful tools of justice. Since its founding in 1992, WITNESS has partnered with groups in more than 60 countries, bringing often unseen images, untold stories and seldom heard voices to the attention of key decision makers, the media, and the general public -- prompting grassroots activism, political engagement, and lasting change. A film-maker and an attorney, Gillian has experience in the areas of international human rights, civil rights, intellectual property, contracts, and family law. At WITNESS, she has helped produce numerous documentary videos for use in advocacy campaigns around the world, including Outlawed: Extraordinary Rendition, Torture and Disappearances in the "War on Terror"; System Failure: Violence, Abuse and Neglect in the California Youth Authority; Books Not Bars; and Operation Fine Girl: Rape Used as a Weapon of War in Sierra Leone. She is also co-editor and author of a book published by Pluto Press called Video for Change: A Guide to Advocacy and Activism (2005). Gillian was formerly the Co-Director of the Global Survival Network, where she coordinated a two-year undercover investigation into the trafficking of women for forced prostitution from Russia and the Newly Independent States that helped spur new anti-trafficking legislation in the U.S. and abroad. She also produced and directed Bought & Sold, a documentary film based on the investigation which received widespread media coverage. Gillian lived in South Africa during 1991 and 1992, investigating hit squads and security force involvement in township violence, and has worked in Boston, Washington, D.C., and New York on issues related to poverty and violence. Gillian has been awarded the Echoing Green Fellowship (1996-1998), the Rockefeller Foundation Next Generation Leadership Award (2000), the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship Award Winner (2001-present), the Tech Laureate of the Tech Museum (2003), Ashoka: Innovators for the Public as a special partner (2003), Journalist of the Month by Women's Enews (2004), and the Skoll Social Entrepreneurship Award (2005). Gillian is a member of the Social Venture Network, promoting new models and leadership for socially and environmentally sustainable business in the 21st century, and she is admitted to the Bar in NY and Washington, D.C. She received her BA from Harvard University and her J.D. from Georgetown University, where she was honored as a Public Interest Law Scholar.*

**Larry Nelson:** This is Larry Nelson, with w3w3.com, Colorado's Voice of the Technology and Business Community. And we are a very fortunate proud partner with the National Center for Women and Information Technology, or, as we call it, NCWIT.

And we've got a three-part interview here; we're doing a wonderful interview with a very strong entrepreneur that we are very interested in talking with on some interesting topics. And we're here today with Lucinda Sanders - we call her Lucy; all of her friends do - who is the CEO of NCWIT, as well as Leigh Kennedy, who is on the board at NCWIT; and she's a serial entrepreneur herself.

So, Lucy, welcome to the show. Let's get into it and introduce your guest.

**Lucy Sanders:** Well, today, we're introducing Gillian Caldwell, who is the executive director of Witness. I have to say, Gillian, after really looking at your website and understanding what the mission of Witness is, it's a very compelling mission that you have. And your tagline, "See It, Film It, Change It", I thought, was one of the best tag lines I've ever seen for the mission of an organization.

Can you give us a little bit of background about witness? I know you started it in 1992.

**Gillian Caldwell:** Yes. So, witness was founded in 1992 by musician and advocate Peter Gabriel. He was struck, when he was touring with Amnesty International, by the isolation of the human-rights defenders that he met in countries around the world who had had their stories of abuse denied and covered up and forgotten.

And he had with him, at that time, in 1989, a handheld video camera; it was a Hi8; it cost about \$1, 800. And he was using that camera to record their stories and their experiences; and he was struck by the potential of those stories and that technology to bridge the gap and connect audiences all around the world to those realities and ensure they weren't covered up and forgotten.

And Witness was founded just a few years later, in the wake of the beating of Rodney King, which, of course, was shot by a handheld video camera, which galvanized an international conversation about police brutality. The Reebok Human Rights Foundation provided the early seed funding in 1992.

And witness began as a technology-transfer organization, with a primary focus on donating handheld video cameras to human-rights advocates around the world. Over the last fifteen years, since we were founded in 1992, Witness has evolved considerably. And, at this stage, as you suggest at the outset, our focus is on enabling people to see it, film it, and change it.

We don't just provide the camera: but we provide both the technical and strategic support that human-rights defenders need to document the violations; ensure that they can, in a compelling, story-driven way, explain not just the problem, but the solution; and get that media in front of the audiences that can make a difference, whether it's a Congressional subcommittee trying to decide whether or not to allocate armed forces and funding in the context of the genocide in Darfur, or whether it's a local judicial official who is being influenced by the evidence that's being presented before him on a videotape.

**Lucy:** Well, and I think, in looking at your site, as well, you're using all the Internet and Web 2.0 technology now to really create this worldwide audience. I mean it's a very compelling use of technology to achieve social good.

**Gillian:** What's really exciting at this stage is that I'm just about to launch something called "the Hub", which will basically be a kind of a YouTube for human rights or, as I like to think of it, a YouMyWikiTube for human rights. If you imagine the technologies and the philosophies of YouTube, MySpace, and Wikipedia, you get close to what we're trying to do at the Hub, which is a site that will be premiering in the fall of 2007.

So this is a destination, a website, to which anybody anywhere could upload visual imagery, whether it's photographs or video, or possibly even audio content, of human-rights-related issues in their communities, here in the United States and around the world. They can upload it and opt in to a community of people that care about those issues and support campaigns for change.

**Lucy:** Well, so, it's real evidence of how technology supports social entrepreneurship. And that gets me to my first question about technology in general: what technologies do you see on the horizon that are really going to make a difference for you, in addition to the Web 2.0 and Internet types of technology?

**Gillian:** Well, of course, the cell phone, and particularly video- and photograph-enabled cell phones, are really making a difference. I mean, historically, when people thought about the Rodney King beating, they thought "Oh, if you can just capture the abuse as it happens, it will make all the difference"; and the reality is that, with the larger video cameras people have historically used, you're unlikely to be in the wrong place at the right time.

But, now, with the handheld cell phones, so many of which are video-enabled and photograph-enabled, there is a brand new opportunity to capture that abuse as it happens. If you think back to the London Tube bombings, just a couple of years ago, when a so-called citizen journalist was reporting live from inside the London Tubes and the BBC moved ahead to create an email address to which anybody could

email imagery of news-related stories in their community, you start to realize that the cell phone is actually really revolutionizing the way we access information, as is text-messaging and, of course, the Internet, which really didn't exist when Witness was founded.

**Lucy:** And the cell network is very ubiquitous as well, especially in developing countries.

**Gillian:** Right. I mean we still have a massive digital divide: but the beauty of the cell networks is that many of the countries which have historically been confronted with that massive divide will be able to leapfrog over the physical infrastructure, as those cellular networks are strengthened; and we'll be able to embed larger and larger files and transmit larger files over the cellular networks.

But it is a concern, still, of course, when we think about the challenges of the Hub.

And to take, for example, perhaps a humanitarian-aid worker in Darfur, who happens to be on the spot as a genocide unfolds, who captures some of that imagery on their cell phone, and who wants to upload it to the Hub so that maybe the Save Darfur Coalition, in Washington, D.C., can then download it and provide that to the Congressional subcommittee: that aid worker faces several challenges.

First of all: What's the bandwidth? What's the cost? What's the expense to upload that content? And does he have the strength of signal to do it?

And secondly: What about the security risks? Here's a big issue for us, because, of course, if we log the IP addresses of the people who are uploading content, even if we enable them to upload the content anonymously, they really may be at risk, and we could face a subpoena, as Yahoo! Did in the case of Chinese dissidents.

So the simple size of the file, of the video file, as it stands, makes it very difficult to encrypt or anonymize those files and it does put people at risk. So the technology is still insipient in terms of really fully enabling what we're talking about.

**Lucy:** It is interesting how you've continually used the latest technologies to help in the pursuit. So, if we switch gears a little bit and we think about you being an entrepreneur: why did you decide to be an entrepreneur, and what is it about entrepreneurship that really makes you tick?

**Gillian:** Well, I mean it's interesting that I have been sort of dubbed a social entrepreneur by a variety of organizations that recognize people in that field, whether it's Ashoka, or the Skoll Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, or the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, really going back to about 2001. And a social entrepreneur is defined variously; but it's really understood as somebody who's really taking an innovative and sustainable approach to an old problem.

And what Ashoka says about social entrepreneurs is that they're born that way. And it's funny: it isn't a primary identity for me; but, more and more, I do understand myself as somebody who's genetically inclined towards innovation and towards growing new ideas and towards thinking really tactically and strategically about what's sustainable.

But my passion is not earning income: my passion is doing work that feeds my soul; and that's why I've always invested myself in work that delivers social value..

**Larry Nelson:** Gillian, who in your life really helped, supported your - whether it was genetically inclined beginnings, or was it a mentor that came along the way? Was it a particular group that really had a major influence on your direction?

**Gillian:** Well, I think, like so many people, the most formative influences for me were both my family - particularly parents, who were not, themselves, deeply involved at a political level but who really had what I would call progressive values and who were very driven by integrity, in terms of how they thought about the world - and then, of course, my teachers, particularly my history teachers, in grammar school and in

high school, who introduced me to Amnesty International.

I began running my high-school chapter of Amnesty International when I was 12 years old; and I recall organizing weekly Urgent Action letter-writing campaigns with students, getting dozens of students to write letters to President Zia-ul-Haq, in Pakistan, at the time, about political prisoners. And I remember organizing a school symposium on torture. And, I think, there, again, not just my parents and their support of my commitment to doing social-justice work, but the teachers that encouraged me.

And then additionally, interestingly, the work of an artist by the name of Leon Galag, who died quite recently, but who did a series called The Mercenary Series, which was very powerful, enormous canvases of mercenaries in Latin America torturing political prisoners. And, strangely enough, because I lived in the back of an art gallery in SoHo, in New York, when I was growing up, those paintings were in my living-room for a period of time.

In fact, I've often commented that, in these paintings, in The Mercenary Series, there was always a perpetrator looking at you looking at them, almost making a witness out of you and demanding that you do something about it. So I see a very consistent narrative thread, in terms of my focus on social justice and my focus on enterprise, going back to the days when I used to host regular bake sales on the local street corner to try to earn a little income.

**Lucy:** I'd say this is genetically baked into you.

**Leigh:** No pun intended. I thought it was really interesting, too: you're a lawyer. Did you pursue a law degree in support of your social activism?

**Gillian:** Yes. I decided to get a law degree because I wanted additional credibility and depth, in terms of doing policy-oriented work. I didn't intend to practice, although I did enjoy the short period of time in which I practiced, both at the administrative level, representing disability applicants, and then also working with special-education cases and discrimination cases, before I got involved in a big undercover investigation on the Russian Mafia and their involvement in trafficking women for forced prostitution.

And that undercover investigation utilized hidden-camera technologies. We posed as foreign buyers interested in purchasing women. And that was my real introduction to video advocacy, as I now call it. But the law degree was always intended to help give me a little bit more credibility, a little bit more depth.

And I didn't - I couldn't anticipate at the time that it would be as useful as it is, of course, in the context of running an organization like Witness, where, you'd think, most of my legal training would come into play in the context of human-rights law, when, in fact, most of what I really deal with on a daily basis, through the three pro-bono law firms that support our work, has to do with intellectual-property and trademark protection.

**Lucy:** That's what I was going to ask you about: digital rights management. But that's probably a discussion for another time.

**Larry:** Yeah.

**Leigh:** So, Gillian, when you think about your career as a social entrepreneur, what's really been the toughest thing that you've had to do?

**Gillian:** The biggest challenge is recognizing that the only thing that will be constant is change, particularly in an organization like Witness, where you're focused on integrating new technologies into social-change work. You have to stay adaptable and evolutionary, which means you're never standing still.

So, while I've been running witness for almost ten years now, I can honestly say that the organization looks, feels, and acts very differently from quarter to quarter.

When I started, it was just me; and, at this stage, for fiscal '08, we're going to have a budget of \$4.2-million and a staff of 30. So that's a very different operation than it is to run something that's just two or three people.

I think the other thing is that, if you're working as an entrepreneur in a social context, you're constantly in the midst of a so-called stretch assignment: you're learning as you move through the process. And what's so important is being sure that you're really thoughtful about reaching out to get the advice and guidance and support that you need along the way, and that you build a system and an infrastructure of support surrounding you, because it may not always exist within the organization itself, but there are people that have done it before and you're not always needing to reinvent the wheel.

**Lucy:** Well, and speaking of advice: if you were sitting in a room with some young people, what advice would you give them about entrepreneurship?

**Gillian:** Well, again, I look at it through the perspective of social enterprise. So, for me, the most important advice I could give anybody is to stay committed to evolution; and that means that you have to live as a learner. I think that Gandhi once said that we should live like we are going to die tomorrow but learn like we will live forever.

And I really believe that's the case: if we aren't open to learning, and if we don't spend as much time listening as we spend speaking, we can't do anything well. So I think that's the most important thing: to stay adaptable, to stay evolutionary - and to build leadership.

Somebody who really is a leader is ultimately somebody who takes all the blame and none of the credit. And that's a hard thing to map your mind around; and, at times, it is a bit of a thankless task, because there's just as many nuts and bolts as there are opportunities for big-picture strategic visioning to take place. But it's really important to stay humble and to stay open and to stay learning.

And, as you mature, over time, you realize that, the more you know, really the less you know, I think.

**Lucy:** That's really true. I have to say Gandhi is - I love his quote: "Be the change you want to see in the world."

**Gillian:** Yeah; well, that's also about really living your values. I think it's so easy to compartmentalize our values and to try to articulate them through the check we write at Christmastime or the bottle we put in the recycling bin.

But the reality is that living your values is a full-time occupation, and it really requires us to challenge ourselves all the time to think and wonder: you know, "Was the thought that just passed through my mind racist?", "Was the dynamic that I just participated in unfair?", "Am I carbon neutral?" I mean all of this is about integrity and about values and about being a productive member of the planet.

**Lucy:** So, speaking of characteristics: when you think about yourself, what personal characteristics do you think have given you advantages in being an entrepreneur?

**Gillian:** Well, I think I have a lot of assets in that department, which have served me really well. One is stick-to-it-iveness: I am dogged and determined, and I will find a way; and that's absolutely necessary. You have to have passion driving your commitment; and I believe, if you're passionate, you can achieve whatever it is that you set out to.

It's also important to have solid organizational skills. A lot of entrepreneurs are visionary but aren't fortunate enough to get the skills of discipline and the organization and detail orientation that is required to pull off an enterprise. So, for those people, I think, it's so important to recognize that and surround themselves with people that do complement them well in that way.

I think the other issue, of course, is the strategic thinking. And, there, it's making sure not just that you give yourself space and opportunity to think strategically, but also that you create environments in which strategy can evolve through collective conversation. Too often, people at all levels of an organization are not involved in creating and participating and designing a strategy for an organization. And that's what builds ownership, and I think that's what builds better long-term solutions...

**Larry Nelson:** Gillian, with a background like you - you've had this organization, now, for ten years; you now have a budget of \$4.2-million; you have 31 employees. Here's a question: how do you bring about balance to your personal and your professional lives?

**Gillian:** Well, the quickest way to get some balance is to have some children. And I have two of those: I have a girl, named Tess, who's just about to turn five, and a boy, named Finley, who will be three shortly. And that really, really necessitates a balance, because I will not miss their childhoods. So it enabled me to really walk the walk and talk the talk when it comes to balance. You know, I have certain lines that I draw, in terms of the number of nights a month that I will be away from my children, and a commitment regarding the number of hours I want to be with them at the beginning and the end of each day. So that's really important.

The other thing that is so important to me, which I'm really grateful to have been able to bring back into my life, is exercise. And I think everybody finds balance in different ways: some people, through spiritual practice; others, through meditation; and, for me, exercise and, at this stage, running is really critical. So I do run five to six days a week, for roughly 45 minutes; and that's a way to really stay balanced and attuned.

**Lucy:** Well, Gillian, you've really achieved a lot. We haven't even really mentioned it on this interview; but you are an author. You're clearly a passionate activist. You're a lawyer. And, also, you're a techlaureate, from the Tech Museum, which is very impressive as well. You've achieved so much. Oh: and a mom, with great kids. What's next for you?

**Gillian:** Well, interestingly, I'm not somebody who's ever had a clearly designed career path in mind. I'm fortunate that I've been able to work throughout my life in the things that are absolutely engrossing to me and that really make me feel passionate. So I don't have a next step in mind.

One of the things that I am increasingly concerned about and do want to direct my attention to, in the context here at Witness and conceivably beyond that, is really the issue of the climate, which is collapsing around us. And I think, first of all, that we are sleeping on the job, in terms of recognizing how serious the issues are, and, second of all, that there is this arbitrary divide between the field of human rights and the environmental movement. And, in fact, if we don't work cohesively together to analyze the intersections between climate collapse and human rights, we're really going to be in trouble.

Just by way of example: there will be, and already are, millions of environmental refugees as sea levels rise. Take a look at Bangladesh: much of Bangladesh will be underwater, millions of people forced from their homes. There is already, all over the world today, wars over resource extraction, whether it be wars for oil - of course Iraq comes to mind there - or gold or other natural minerals, which displace hundreds of thousands of people in countries and force them to confront unspeakable violence.

There will be the massive spread of vectorial disease. We're already seeing that in disease mutations which function in higher-temperature environments.

So I really see that as a place for a lot more focus and energy; and I'm passionate about seeing what I can do, at Witness and beyond, in that area.

**Larry:** Gillian, I have a feeling that you're going to see it, film it, and change it.

**Lucy:** We really want to thank you for everything you're doing for our world and at Witness. We really appreciate the time that you have taken to talk to us.

**Gillian:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Lucy:** I just want to remind everybody that the podcasts are hosted at the NCWIT website, [www.ncwit.org](http://www.ncwit.org), and also [w3w3.com](http://w3w3.com).

**Larry:** That's it.

**Gillian:** And you can go to [www.witness.org](http://www.witness.org) to learn more about the work.

**Lucy:** Wonderful. Thank you very much.

**Larry:** One more link.

**Leigh:** Thank you, Gillian.

**Lucy:** Bye-bye.

**Gillian:** O.K. Thank you.