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A hire purpose

With endless energy and commitment, Poonam Ahluwalia seeks solutions to the worldwide problem of youth unemployment

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff | September 13, 2006

NEWTON -- When you step inside Poonam Ahluwalia's modest cubicle, you're not surprised to see evidence of her seriousness of purpose. It makes perfect sense that the woman organizing an international summit that begins today in Kenya on youth employment would have her walls covered with action items and draft agendas. But what's with that prominently displayed cover of a 2002 Time magazine featuring a grinning Tom Cruise, in full matinee-idol mode?

Ahluwalia delivers her answer blithely, as if the answer were self-evident: "Tom Cruise is going to be an integral part of the campaign." She smiles. "But he doesn't know it yet."

It's probably prudent not to bet against her. Ahluwalia, 49, has a way of enlisting significant figures to her cause. Former president Bill Clinton cochaired the first summit four years ago. This year's summit, which is expected to draw 2,000 delegates from more than 100 countries, is cochaired by the presidents of Senegal and the Dominican Republic. The deputy prime minister of Iraq is slated to deliver an address today.

Two decades ago, when she and her husband moved from India to the United States, they worked as household help for a Brookline family. Now, she is spearheading a global campaign to find solutions to youth unemployment and its social consequences -- any list of which could include poverty, drug abuse, crime, poor health care, terrorism, and the simple tragedy of untapped human potential.

"The world will go where young people dream," Ahluwalia says. "So we have to make them dreamers."

But she knows that dreams are not enough, not when the estimated 1 billion people in the world between the ages 15 and 24 make up a quarter of the world's working population but half of the world's unemployed, according to the United Nations.

So in the past four years, Ahluwalia's YES (for Youth Employment Summit) Campaign has provided expertise to organizations in dozens of nations ranging from Afghanistan to Paraguay to Sierra Leone that has helped them collectively obtain millions of dollars in funding for projects to combat youth unemployment. The campaign has established 84 YES networks around the world that act as a force for education and job training, help attract private-sector investment to start - up businesses, and push for government policies that generate jobs for young people.

In each country, Ahluwalia says, the emphasis is on self-sufficiency, on equipping young people with entrepreneurial skills that enable them to build their own businesses. "Youth are a natural resource that every country has," she says. "But they're not utilizing them properly."

It is an uphill struggle almost by definition, yet if pessimism is an occupational hazard, Ahluwalia does not seem to have succumbed to it. Her eyes shine as she rapidly sketches visions for reaching near-impossible goals: ending poverty, ending hunger. "She is very possibly the most dynamic woman I've ever met," says Sarah Whittemore, 22, a Boston University graduate student who works on the YES Campaign. "She is a woman who will not accept no. People talk about solving poverty; what she felt was if you start with youth, it's going to have a domino effect."

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Her supporters say Ahluwalia has helped focus a spotlight on an issue -- the shortage of employment opportunities for the young -- that sometimes gets short shrift in countries that struggle to cope with pressing crises such as war, AIDS, and famine. At first, there were those who took a dubious view of the newcomer, with her small budget, handful of staffers, and lack of stature in the international aid community. "People asked, 'How can just a few people create this kind of movement around the world and make some kind of difference?'" says Janet Whitla, former president of the Education Development Center, under whose auspices the YES Campaign operates. "But she's proved the point."

"She has almost an aura about her," Whitla adds. "She really does emanate a kind of energy that, I think, helps people to become their best selves, which is what her goal has been for young people. It's just amazing to watch her interact with young people around the world."

Ahluwalia was raised in an affluent family in Jaipur, India, but she didn't have to look far to see the most wretched poverty. As a child, she admits, "I would feel odd: so much and so little, juxtaposed."

She came to believe that the cultural subjugation of women was at the root of much poverty in India. In her 20s she worked as a marketing manager for a chain of pizzerias called Pizza King, but also began to volunteer for an anti-hunger organization. After arriving in the United States in 1985, she at first worked providing child care, cooking, and cleaning for a Brookline family but by the late 1980s was working on welfare-to-work programs in the administration of Massachusetts governor Michael S. Dukakis. By 1997, she had begun consulting on workforce development for EDC.

In that role she ran workshops in Peru, India, and Namibia that were praised, but she was troubled by the feedback she got from young people. The workshops were not focused enough on the future, they told her. *Their* future. "On the global agenda, youth employment was not really featured," she says. She adds wryly. "You know the saying about 'Fools rush in . . .'? I started saying, 'We can do this. We need a global movement for youth employment.'"

So she launched the YES Campaign in 1998. While planning for the first summit, she bumped into Dukakis in an airport and asked him to contact Clinton about serving as cochair of the summit in Alexandria, Egypt, in 2002. Dukakis did so, and

Clinton agreed, as did Suzanne Mubarak, wife of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. For a fledgling effort, it was a dose of instant credibility. "Once [Clinton] agreed, it opened up a whole new world for us," she says. Though she was unsuccessful in luring Cruise to cochair this year's summit, "we're definitely going to go back to him," she says.

When this year's summit kicks off today, delegates will be there from organizations ranging from the United Nations to Microsoft to the US Agency for International Development. Seventy Cabinet-level ministers are expected to attend. The focus will be on ways to encourage entrepreneurship, attract foreign investment, strengthen trade, and develop markets for goods and services that can employ the young.

Beyond the summit, Ahluwalia sees encouraging signs that the cause she has devoted so much energy to is gaining wider attention. The UN is intensifying its focus on the issue, declaring in a statement last month that "at the centre of youth poverty is the need to address widespread youth unemployment." The World Bank recently enacted a loan program to help poor youths break into the labor market. And starting today, Ahluwalia hopes, the effort to find jobs for young people worldwide will kick into an even higher gear.

When she first launched the YES Campaign, Ahluwalia confides, "I told everyone this might not work. But I knew it would." Now, she says, "something has shifted in the world."

Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com. ■

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