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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Age of Ambition

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With the American presidential campaign in full swing, the obvious way to change the world might seem to be through politics.

But growing numbers of young people are leaping into the fray and doing the job themselves. These are the social entrepreneurs, the 21st-century answer to the student protesters of the 1960s, and they are some of the most interesting people here at the World Economic Forum (not only because they're half the age of everyone else).

Andrew Klaber, a 26-year-old playing hooky from Harvard Business School to come here (don't tell his professors!), is an example of the social entrepreneur. He spent the summer after his sophomore year in college in Thailand and was aghast to see teenage girls being forced into prostitution after their parents had died of AIDS.

So he started Orphans Against AIDS (www.orphansagainstaids.org), which pays school-related expenses for hundreds of children who have been orphaned or otherwise affected by AIDS in poor countries. He and his friends volunteer their time and pay administrative costs out of their own pockets so that every penny goes to the children.

Mr. Klaber was able to expand the nonprofit organization in Africa through introductions made by Jennifer Staple, who was a year ahead of him when they were in college. When she was a sophomore, Ms. Staple founded an organization in her dorm room to collect old reading glasses in the United States and ship them to poor countries. That group, Unite for Sight, has ballooned, and last year it provided eye care to 200,000 people (www.uniteforsight.org).

In the '60s, perhaps the most remarkable Americans were the civil rights workers and antiwar protesters who started movements that transformed the country. In the 1980s, the most fascinating people were entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, who started companies and ended up revolutionizing the way we use technology.

Today the most remarkable young people are the social entrepreneurs, those who see a problem in society and roll up their sleeves to address it in new ways. Bill Drayton, the chief executive of an organization called Ashoka that supports social entrepreneurs, likes to say that such people neither hand out fish nor teach people to fish; their aim is to revolutionize the fishing industry. If that sounds insanely ambitious, it is. John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan title their new book on social entrepreneurs "The Power of Unreasonable People."

Universities are now offering classes in social entrepreneurship, and there are a growing number of role models. Wendy Kopp turned her thesis at Princeton into Teach for America and has had far more impact on schools than the average secretary of education.

One of the social entrepreneurs here is Soraya Salti, a 37-year-old Jordanian woman who is trying to transform the Arab world by teaching entrepreneurship in schools. Her organization, Injaz, is now training 100,000 Arab students each year to find a market niche, construct a business plan and then launch and nurture a business.

The program (www.injaz.org.jo) has spread to 12 Arab countries and is aiming to teach one million students a year. Ms. Salti argues that entrepreneurs can stimulate the economy, give young people a purpose and revitalize the Arab world. Girls in particular have flourished in the program, which has had excellent reviews and is getting support from the U.S. Agency for International Development. My hunch is that Ms. Salti will contribute more to stability and peace in the Middle East than any number of tanks in Iraq, U.N. resolutions or summit meetings.

“If you can capture the youth and change the way they think, then you can change the future,” she said.

Another young person on a mission is Ariel Zylbersztejn, a 27-year-old Mexican who founded and runs a company called Cinepop, which projects movies onto inflatable screens and shows them free in public parks. Mr. Zylbersztejn realized that 90 percent of Mexicans can't afford to go to movies, so he started his own business model: He sells sponsorships to companies to advertise to the thousands of viewers who come to watch the free entertainment.

Mr. Zylbersztejn works with microcredit agencies and social welfare groups to engage the families that come to his movies and help them start businesses or try other strategies to overcome poverty. Cinepop is only three years old, but already 250,000 people a year watch movies on his screens — and his goal is to take the model to Brazil, India, China and other countries.

So as we follow the presidential campaign, let's not forget that the winner isn't the only one who will shape the world. Only one person can become president of the United States, but there's no limit to the number of social entrepreneurs who can make this planet a better place.

You are invited to comment on this column at Mr. Kristof's blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground.

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