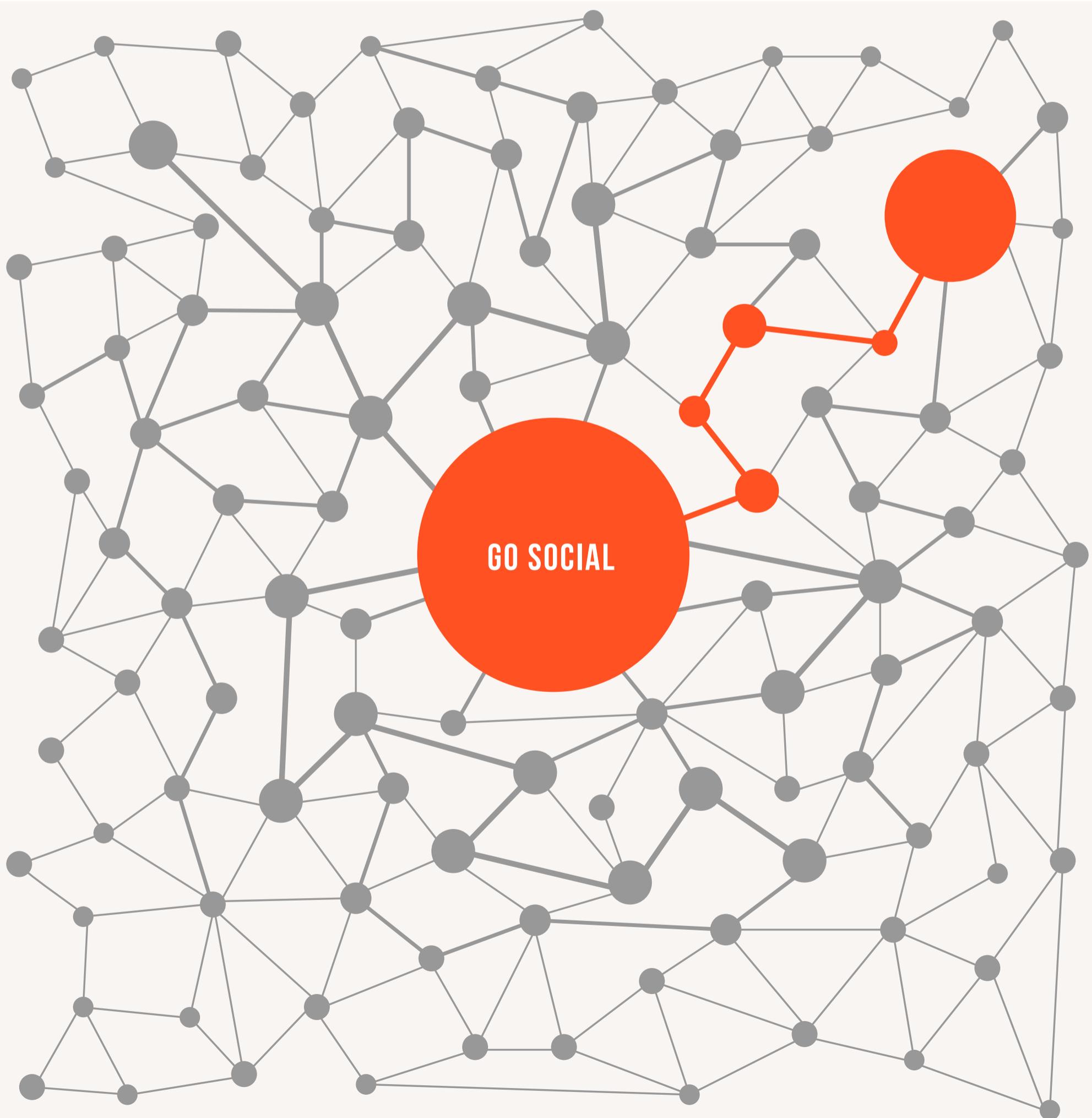


SUPPORTING THE NEXT
GENERATION OF
SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS



As entrepreneurs, many challenges stand in the way of realizing our dreams: lack of access to resources like cash or raw materials, having to make difficult choices when we try to break the mold on how business gets done, and managing our personal lives. Even when those hurdles are overcome, it can be very lonely forging new ground while staying true to your values and maintaining your vision.

What a difference it would make to be supported, connected and inspired by other mission-driven CEOs, business leaders, impact investors and social entrepreneurs who profit as they build a just and sustainable economy. As it turns out, that kind of support is within our reach. And that is what made it so exciting to meet Deb Nelson, Executive Director of [The Social Venture Network \(SVN\)](#), an organization whose members are leveraging the power of business to solve social and environmental problems.

“We work to empower a community of about 600 triple-bottom-line (people, planet and profit) enterprises whose leaders work diligently to build the infrastructure for sustainable business. We organize social entrepreneurs into Peer Circles that meet monthly. This breaks the isolation so commonly felt by social entrepreneurs and creates a safe environment in which to cause breakthroughs in personal and professional development, business practices and financial success,” says Deb.



INTERNET CONNECTION REQUIRED

She is both intense and soft-spoken. Her contagious passion and down-to-earth common sense is genuine and engaging. Deb lives and breathes her mission of supporting the next generation of world-changing entrepreneurs from under-represented groups; people of color, women and young people, as well as those from under-represented geographic areas.

Deb has served as Executive Director for the past 12 years. Before joining SVN, she was with Working Assets, an organization that provides an easy way for ordinary people to make a difference in the world just by doing the things they do every day. Moving to SVN, was a natural progression for her. She also worked for American Express, and served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cameroon. She has a B.A. in English from Northwestern University and an M.B.A. in marketing and management strategy from the Kellogg Graduate School of Management. When she's not at SVN, Deb enjoys exploring the Bay Area with her two sons, Sam and Will.

“Twenty-six years ago, the entrepreneurs and investors who founded SVN, were considered radical, some called them crazy,” says Deb. “They wanted to change the way the world does business.” Co-founder Josh Mailman is often quoted as saying, “We decided to build a new paradigm: one in which business operates to add value to society - without compromising the well-being of future generations.”

In addition to believing it could be done, they embraced causing the change as a business opportunity. SVN members have invested billions of dollars in companies that positively affect both society and the environment, which is why they call it “impact investing.” The Social Venture Network has helped hundreds of entrepreneurs create more successful, responsible and sustainable enterprises including Eileen Fisher, Etsy, Ben & Jerry's, and TerraCycle.

“The members also invest two to three hours a month participating in SVN’s Peer Circles,” Deb explains. “These are groups of six to nine members that meet monthly to share experiences, challenges and opportunities. In a safe and confidential environment, they advise and mentor each other.”

In order to participate in a Peer Circle, members must commit to a full year. At the first meeting, Deb or Donna Daniels, Director of Programs and Strategic Communications provide training. They help the group take on sharing the responsibilities of facilitating the meetings and creating that safe and confidential environment that is so critical to the success of the program. Groups meet in person and via telephone conference. In-person meetings are two hours and telephone conferences are three hours. Each month a different group member is the focus. Peers bring both business and personal challenges and opportunities.

“The work they do together is highly meaningful and complex,” says Deb. “It’s no coincidence that a member will be on the verge of a growth opportunity or even a crisis and use their Peer Circle to cause a breakthrough. I’ve seen it happen over and over. Whether the member is an early pioneer or new pioneer, they all have the same goals,” she adds.



Deb spends a great deal of her time putting together two SVN conferences each year—in the spring and fall—where attendees take advantage of highly substantive programs, make connections with people, ideas and the resources they need to keep moving forward. Members volunteer to do one-to-one advising throughout the conference and the group bestows an annual award on a handful of entrepreneurs. This year's winners are:

Kavita M. Shukla & Swaroop Samant, Fenugreen:

While the world's farmers harvest enough to feed the planet, 25% of our food supply is lost to spoilage. Fenugreen is taking on this massive global challenge with a simple innovation, FreshPaper. Low-cost, compostable and made with organic spices, FreshPaper keeps produce fresh 2-4 times longer. Fenugreen aims to revolutionize the food economy from farm to fork, and transform the lives of the 1.6 billion who lack access to refrigeration with its mission of "Fresh for All."

Tim Jahnigen and Lisa Tarver, One World Futbol Project:

One World Futbol inventor Tim Jahnigen was inspired to create a nearly indestructible ball after watching news footage of kids in Darfur playing a soccer game using a ball of trash tied up with twine. With a concept and material in mind, Tim set out to design a ball that played like a real soccer ball, but would never need a pump and never go flat—even when punctured multiple times. One World Futbol Project's mission is to bring the healing power of play to youth world-wide by making, selling

and distributing nearly indestructible balls that survive the harshest environments. Collaborating with sponsors, organizations and individuals, One World Futbol Project delivers balls to disadvantaged communities where play and sport are used to foster social change.

Liz and Ben Bohannon, Sseko Designs:

Sseko Designs is an ethical fashion brand that uses fashion to educate and empower women. Sseko hires high-potential young women in Uganda to make sandals to enable them to earn money through dignified employment that will go directly towards their college educations and ensure they will continue pursuing their dreams. By working for Sseko during their gap year, these talented young women from impoverished backgrounds gain access to a comprehensive social impact program tailored to their needs and will earn enough income to finance their career ambitions.

Elizabeth Scharpf, Sustainable Health Enterprises:

SHE is a social venture that invests in people and ideas that are typically overlooked as vehicles of socio-economic change.

SHE's initial initiative involves developing a franchise model to manufacture and distribute affordable, eco-friendly menstrual pads for girls and women by sourcing local, inexpensive raw materials (e.g., banana fibers) and leveraging existing networks. Coupling these new businesses with public health and hygiene education and advocacy will have a significant social and economic impact on these communities.

Michael Murphy and Alan Ricks, MASS Design Group:

MASS Design Group: MASS Design Group is a non-profit architecture firm committed to building better buildings and enabling the people who build them. Their first project, the Butaro Hospital (Rwanda, 2011), employed architectural solutions to mitigate the transmission of airborne disease and spurred local markets by hiring and training over 4,000 community members. Today, the team works across Rwanda, Uganda, Liberia, Haiti and the US, conducting immersive research in communities not only to build context-appropriate, safer and healthier facilities, but also to leverage local material markets, lead training workshops, spur craft development

and foster economic empowerment. MASS believes that this inclusive process is the key to healthier and more resilient communities, and so invests in people to drive positive change.

The next SVN conferences will be October 17 - 20 in Baltimore, Maryland and April 25 - 28 in San Diego, California. To learn more, check out their website at www.svn.org.

In our interview, Deb talks a lot more about how mentoring and advising has contributed to her own career. When I asked if she belonged to a Peer Circle, she reminded me that as the trainer and Executive Director, she really can't do that. But she also added, "If I ever leave this job, the first thing I'll do is join SVN and sign up to be in a Peer Circle."



Susan Bender Phelps is a speaker and trainer who runs [Odyssey Mentoring and Leadership](#). Her new book [Aspire Higher](#) tells compelling true stories of career and business mentoring success.

