



ASHOKA INNOVATORS FOR THE PUBLIC

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Contact: Esther F. Lardent (202) 729-6699
Katherine Hutt (703) 938-4540

Esther Lardent to Be Inducted Into International Ashoka Fellowship

*Ashoka: Innovators for the Public recognizes founder of the “Pro Bono Institute”
for integrating civic engagement into the practice of law*

February 2008 (Arlington, Virginia) – Some 80 percent of the civil legal needs of poor people in the U.S. are not being met, but *Esther Lardent* has set out to change that. The founder of the *Pro Bono Institute* is transforming the culture of law firms and corporate legal departments, creating a growing commitment to pro bono work across the United States and, increasingly, on a global scale. As a result, the legal needs of the underserved are being better addressed and the civic engagement of the legal community is growing stronger.

For her dedication and vision, Lardent will be one of 21 social entrepreneurs from the United States, Canada, Mexico and Central America who will be inducted into an international fellowship by *Ashoka: Innovators for the Public* at a special ceremony on February 25 at the new Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County. Once elected, Fellows benefit from being part of the Ashoka fellowship for life.

“I went to law school to be a public interest lawyer,” explains Lardent. “I did civil rights work and poverty law work, but I constantly felt frustrated because no matter how hard I worked, I could only help a small number of clients.” Lardent moved to Boston, where a vibrant pro bono culture flourished, and she realized she could have a greater impact training and supporting people who want to do pro bono work. She began to assess what was going on informally in legal departments, and then to “figure out the obstacles and resolve them so people who wanted to do pro bono could do it.”

Key to her success in this area was discerning what drives people to pro bono work (supportive peers and effective programming are huge), and then slowly building on that. Today, hundreds of legal departments developing formal pro bono programs for the first time; most programs are less than a year or two old.

1700 North Moore Street | Suite 2000 | Arlington, VA 22209 USA | (703) 527-8300 Phone | (703) 527-8383 Fax | www.ashoka.org | www.changemakers.net

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Lardent founded the Pro Bono Institute to energize and elevate the way the profession meets the needs of the underserved. The Institute creates and guides law firms and corporate legal departments to innovate best practices, track commitment and assess performance. Some participants do transactional pro bono work for non-profit groups; while others do more classic legal aid work (divorce, adoption, landlord tenant issues, wills for the elderly, domestic violence assistance, etc.) for those who cannot afford an attorney.

Lardent has been delighted to discover the “hidden talents” of certain lawyers with a passion for helping others; for instance, the General Counsel of Microsoft is committed to immigration issues and many partners in major law firms are representing death row inmates. Thanks to her efforts, more than 150 major firms have signed on to the Law Firm Pro Bono Challenge and almost 70 legal departments have enrolled in the Corporate Pro Bono Challenge. Representation of the poor is improving and the civic engagement of the legal community is blossoming.

Headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, Ashoka gives leading social entrepreneurs a global network, an international association of their peers. Fellows become lifetime members, receiving initial support that enables them to focus full-time on their work and access to professional and strategic services to help them achieve pattern-changing impact in their fields. Each Fellow is also eligible to apply for supplemental funding for collaborative projects, and to receive training and technical assistance through Ashoka and its partners.

“Ashoka Fellows create pattern-changing solutions for the most pressing social problems of our day,” says Ashoka’s U.S. Director Barbara Kazdan. “Although Ashoka U.S. is only seven years old, we have identified the most inventive and dedicated social entrepreneurs to join with their peers to elevate and strengthen the ‘citizen sector’ here and around the world. We now have 250 Fellows from North America, 85 of whom are from the United States, where they are bringing their innovative programs to all 50 states and the developing world.”

Ashoka Fellows work in six broad fields: learning/youth development, the environment, health, human rights, economic development and civic engagement. Selection criteria include the newness and potential social impact of the idea, as well as the candidate’s entrepreneurial qualities.

Ashoka: Innovators for the Public is a global community of social entrepreneurs who deliver innovative solutions to social problems. To build this citizen sector community, Ashoka identifies and supports leading social entrepreneurs, creates opportunities for collaboration, and builds systems and institutions that facilitate high impact social solutions. Over the past 26 years since Bill Drayton founded Ashoka, the organization has invested in over 2,000 Ashoka Fellows in more than 60 countries. In 2008 Ashoka will launch programs in Israel and Russia. Ashoka’s global fellowship is privately financed by individuals, venture networks, foundations, and leading business entrepreneurs.