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Unsung Hero: Alison Bock

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Unsung Hero: ALISON BOCK

m a k i n g i t p e r s o n a l

As the founder and president of Landmines Blow!®, Alison Bock has built an influential organization that raises awareness about landmines and unexploded ordnance, and helps victims all over the world. In the eyes of many people, Bock is truly an Unsung Hero.

by Matthew Voegel [Mine Action Information Center]

In today's world, sometimes it seems intimidating to stand up and make a difference. That feeling was no different for Alison Bock, founder and president of the nongovernmental organization Landmines Blow!, when she attended the summit on a Mine Free World in Nairobi, Kenya in November 2004. "When we attended [the summit] it was the first time I met real landmine survivors from everywhere," says Bock. "I was overwhelmed at how many people needed help and wondered how I could really make a difference because the problem was so huge and we were so small." But in the mine-action community, this defeatist attitude is not an option. "Then I met a landmine survivor from Cambodia who told me to focus on making a difference in the life of one person at a time. You can make a difference in one life. So I did and the rest, as they say, is history."

Bock was selected as a Volvo for Life Award semi-finalist from the state of Illinois because of her work to educate young Americans about the landmine crisis abroad and also because of her determination to help others in need. Stacy Davis of the U.S State Department, who has worked with Bock, says that her "dedication, commitment [and] drive to make a positive difference in this world" are what make her stand out as an individual.

Bock started Landmines Blow! in August 2003 and worked her way from the bottom up with her organization. "I started the organization with about \$150 from my spare-change jar," reveals Bock. "I designed the logo and started selling T-shirts online and that is how we paid the bills for the first year." At the time, Bock was also attending school, holding a grade-point average of 3.8 and intending to graduate. "It was hard in the sense that it required a lot of time, especially the first year when I applied for the 501(c)(3) and built the Web site with a book from the local library." However, when it came down to choosing between her education and her work, Bock chose the latter. "There was no way I could work full-time, found and run a nonprofit organization and go to school, so I put [my education] on hold. Once Landmines Blow! took off, I never looked back."

Landmines Blow!

"Landmines Blow! has been a volunteer-driven organization thus far so our overhead is low and most of the money we raise goes toward serving people, which is what it is all

about," states Bock. The organization's main goals include raising awareness about landmines and unexploded ordnance and promoting women in their respective communities. However, Landmines Blow! also brings something new to the table. "We asked survivors what they needed," says Bock, "and they told us they needed clean water." With that, Landmines Blow! has made another one of its main objectives assisting survivors, refugees and internally displaced persons by providing them access to clean, safe water, which they do not have access to because of landmines and UXO.

Along with a different focus and approach, the organization's name itself has turned heads and gained attention. "I have a nephew that was about 18 at the time and he used the word 'blows' to describe his relationship with his girlfriend," reveals Bock. "I was in the middle of doing a research project for a cultural anthropology course on landmines, and I said out loud, 'landmines blow,' because they really do. That became the name of my paper and then my presentation and then my organization."

Since the beginning, Bock and Landmines Blow! Vice President Jose de Arteaga have pushed the organization to reach new heights. Landmines Blow! now has over 1,000 sub-



Landmines Blow! Water Well in Mong Commune, Srey Snam district, Siem Reap province, Cambodia in December 2006. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALISON BOCK



Jose de Arteaga and Alison Bock in Kvek village, December 2006. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEA PHAN

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scribers to its newsletter and has sold hundreds of T-shirts, hats and coffee mugs throughout the world to raise money for the cause. The organization's Web site receives thousands of hits each month and can now be found as one of the top 10 Google™ searches under the term "landmines." On top of that, the organization has been able to work closely with the U.S Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement on certain projects and has also taken part in their Public-Private Partnership Program along with dozens of other organizations. This, of course, has given Landmines Blow! even more recognition. "After we launched Project Safe Water and received our first grant from the Department of State, we gained credibility with larger donors and corporate entities," explains Bock. "We get a lot of in-kind support from businesses [as well]."

Project Safe Water, which has become one of Landmines Blow!'s finest achievements so far, is the organization's first step in making sure clean water is available for landmine survivors, refugees and others in Cambodia. In cooperation with the U.S Department of State, Landmines Blow! is currently in Phase One of the operation, which includes the construction of 10 wells that will provide safe, clean water to almost 1,800 victims, refugees, internally displaced persons and amputees. Bock hopes to double that number in 2007 and also replicate the project in other countries for the long term.

Personal Sacrifice and Selflessness

Bock is no stranger to activism and helping others. Some of her work included being team captain for AIDS Walk Chicago for several years. Her team was able to raise over \$200,000 for AIDS research. In addition, Bock has worked with include Adopt-A-Minefield, Habitat for Humanity, Human Rights Watch, the American Cancer Society, the American Federation for AIDS Research and many others.

Since Landmines Blow! is completely volunteer-run and non-profit, Bock also holds a full-time job. "I like my day job," says Bock, "but I believe that assisting landmine survivors and refugees is my purpose and it does not feel like work to me. It is the most rewarding thing I have ever experienced in my life."

Bock's selflessness is only amplified more by her determination to continue her work, even in the face of her own personal battles. In 2005, Bock was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, a chronic disease that affects the central nervous system. Despite the gravity of her medical condition, she kept working. "MS was a temporary setback, [but] it gave me 'new eyes' and, if anything, a sense of urgency to get out there and do as much as possible while I have the ability," declares Bock. "None of us knows what tomorrow will bring but we don't think that way when we are completely healthy. We take it for granted. I am a much stronger person mentally and more patient and empathetic." In fact, the day after Bock was diagnosed with the disease, she helped fly a young Croatian landmine victim and his brother from Zagreb to a music camp for the blind in New Orleans.

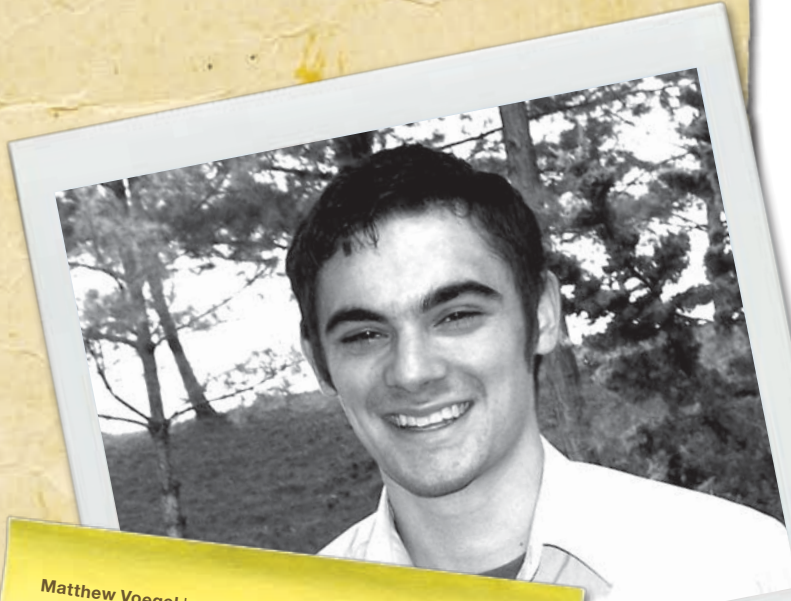
Conclusion

The future looks bright for Bock and Landmines Blow!. New ideas and developments are circulat-

ing throughout the organization and creating a buzz in the mine-action world. "I think that mine action needs some new blood," remarks Bock. "I think that it needs people who are passionate about it to get out there and talk about it. I think that it needs some new champions because it is still a significant problem." New programs are coming soon for the organization, including a new initiative called H2O—Help to Others. Along with this new program, expanding the already successful Project Safe Water to other countries is another goal for the near future. Bock also wants to make strides in advocating for women's rights. "I'd really like to focus on the promotion of women in the communities that we serve," says Bock.

In the realm of mine action, Bock has had a great impact and still keeps contributing in such a spirited manner; others can't help but admire her character. "I like her a lot personally, as well as professionally," states Davis. "She is diligent, anxious to follow the rules and regulations and provide the information and carry out the responsibilities and requirements of the grant. She's very easy to work with." Her continuous work in the mine-action community is slowly making the world a little brighter for those whose world has been darkened by landmines and UXO. "The true heroes are the thousands of survivors out there trying to make ends meet," asserts Bock. "They don't want handouts. They want the opportunity to support their families—basic things like food, shelter, clean water and an education. They want hope."

See Endnotes, Page



Matthew Voegel has been working as an Editorial Assistant for the Journal of Mine Action since October 2006. He is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in print journalism at James Madison University.

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