

COVER

T a k i n g Y o u t h G l o b a l

EIGHT YEARS AGO, Jennifer Corriero, then 19, and friend Michael Furdyk conceived of a “capital” idea – in more ways than one. They were cycling down Ottawa’s Parliament Hill trying to think of a way to help young people change the world. Corriero and Furdyk knew technology itself wasn’t enough, but thought that by yoking the energy and talent of young people to technology, something great would come of it – and the seeds of TakingITGlobal (TIG) were sown.

“We both had an interest in technology,” says Corriero, “and we were wondering why young people don’t get more involved in global issues and initiatives. We thought we might be able to create a Web space that could foster inspiration, information and involvement. We eventually came up with the idea of a Web site as a platform for exchange of information, ideas and connections. But before we got to design it, Mike and I did a stint working at Microsoft for six months. They had heard about TIG and invited us for a six-month consulting project in Seattle. They wanted us to help them understand and re-think how they were approaching the Net Generation at the time.”

It wasn’t until Corriero and Furdyk were back in Toronto that they really got TIG rolling. Corriero also enrolled at York University for a BA in individualized studies in the Atkinson Faculty of Liberal & Professional Studies. “My parents, neither of whom had a chance to attend university, were kind of freaking out that I was doing both of these things [her degree and developing TIG] at the same time,” says Corriero. “But I really wanted to pursue this dream and eventually I found I had to complete my degree part-time. I’ve managed to do both.”

After its launch at takingitglobal.org, word of mouth spread about TIG and things took off. Since its humble beginnings in 1999, TIG has become a much-honoured international organization built around an interactive Web site that allows young people around the world to collaborate on various online projects. Those projects usually target local, regional and global issues, Corriero says. Today, TIG, which is headquartered in Toronto, has a youth-led staff of 30, a budget of more than \$1 million a year, and 150,000 members (she’s hoping to build that to five million in the next few years) from more than 200 countries worldwide. Its



Jennifer Corriero has created a highly successful Web engine to help young people change the world.

BY MICHAEL TODD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF KIRK

COVER

Web site receives upwards of a million hits a day and has had eight million unique visitors to the site over the years, says Corriero.

Now 27, Corriero (BA '03, MES '06) is no longer the wistful 19-year-old she once was, but she's still out to change the world, she says. And, in her own way, she has. As co-founder and executive director of TIG, she holds the same dreams and enthusiasm for global action and investment in youth as she did that day in Ottawa in 1999. In fact, in recognition of her work and TIG's reputation, she was named a "Young Global Leader" by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2005 for helping to empower young people through technology. Among her peers getting the same award that year were the founders of Yahoo and Google. It was a natural follow-up to 2003, when the WEF named her a Global Leader for Tomorrow and *Time* magazine marked her as a leader for "Canada's Next Generation".

"USING TECHNOLOGY to create online communities seemed like the perfect way to address different needs, be they environmental, social, community or political," says Corriero. As an example, in 2006 TIG used its online presence – its network can be accessed in 11 languages – to increase youth participation at the 16th annual international AIDS conference, held in Toronto. Also in 2006, Creating Local Connections was launched as a Canada-wide initiative to increase youth participation and collaboration.

What interested Corriero when she was at York? Did her studies influence her approach to TIG? "First of all I love learning," she says. "I love to learn in a way that helps me expand my ideas about the world and also develops practical skills, the kind of learning that combines both theory and practice, and I think I got that at York with my interdisciplinary program in individualized studies. My focus was on business, communications, technology and culture. It all ties in with what I'm doing now.

"What I studied at York really complements my entrepreneurial work with TIG," says Corriero. "For my master's I was in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. I wasn't just looking at the natural world but also at social environments. I did a lot of work around participatory action research, cultural production, social movements, international development studies and the like. My major project was on youth-led action in an international context."

Corriero's early focus on youth in her academic studies has continued at TIG. "Youth are our key stakeholders," she says. Apathy isn't the problem among youth today, it's more lack of information about world issues and the imperative for action, she explains. "TIG's mandate is to offer youth a platform where they can navigate information on social issues and check out opportunities, have a voice and get involved. That can include

events to participate in – like the recent international AIDS conference – networks to join, or funds to access to support local projects and initiatives."

Corriero notes that too often so-called "world" issues seem far away to the average person – let alone a young person. "It can be daunting for young people to know how to get involved," she says. But she believes technology can help. "People today are more literate and educated generally," she says. "And increasingly the Internet offers opportunities to participate in the creation, access and dissemination of information. Youth are especially tuned in to this. Now your friends can just as easily be on the other side of the world as on the other side of the street."

To date, TIG has developed many initiatives to provide learning, cross-cultural awareness and development opportunities among young people. It recently helped to create Web sites for various non-profit groups including Oxfam Canada, Greenpeace, United Nations associations and Journalists for Human Rights. Other projects include toolkits, such as a "Guide to Action" which is a Web-based, educational booklet that guides young people through the process of taking action to benefit their communities. With support from Microsoft, TIG also created a Web portal called "Online Safety and Security" as a way to educate youth about Internet concerns such as protection and abuse of intellectual property, cyber bullying, online predators, identity theft, online security and cyber citizenship. TIG community building initiatives include discussion boards, e-groups, newsletters, blogs, open forums, an online gallery of youth artwork called Global Gallery (an actual art gallery where members post their creations) and an online magazine, *Panorama* – all at takingitglobal.org.

Of course, all these initiatives take money. So where does TIG find support? Partners include computer industry players such as RBC Financial, Microsoft, Zeus Technology, Google, Fusepoint Managed Services and Cisco Systems, among others. Key supporters also include the likes of J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Canadian International Development Agency and, notes Corriero, TIG's all-important citizen donors.

For Corriero, TIG has in many ways fulfilled the social activist vision she had for herself years ago while riding her bike down Parliament Hill. But she doesn't plan to rest on her laurels. What's in her future? "The skills that I've developed now are very different from the ones I had when I started," she says. "Whether or not I'm here in 10 years working with TIG, I think there will always be a big part of me that's focused on contributing to a culture where there is a commitment toward healthy development and including youth as a necessary part of that process." ■