



ETHNIC MINORITIES OF BURMA
ADVOCACY AND RESOURCE CENTER

January 13, 2017

Dear Forty Under Forty Nomination Committee Members:

I am nominating Jill Niswander for the 2017 Forty under Forty award because she is someone who truly becomes the change she wishes to see in the world.

When I first met Jill three years ago, it was clear that she is a smart, incisive woman. In the time I have gotten to know her, I have learned her intelligence is matched by her compassion.

In 2010, Jill learned about "Dress for Success" (DFS) on the Oprah Winfrey show. Dress for Success is a worldwide non-profit organization that empowers women to achieve economic independence by providing professional attire, development and support. Unlike most viewers, Jill actually picked up the phone and called the national "Dress for Success" office to volunteer at their local office. Much to Jill's dismay there was NO DFS office in Iowa! So, Jill did what change makers do, she got started. She did the hard work.

Jill launched Dress for Success in July 2011, while working a full time job at Principal Financial Group and supporting a family: a husband, two children and pregnant with her third. During her time as a founding partner, board member and program director, Jill also launched a nationally funded "Going Places Network Program" to serve women who were struggling to obtain employment. In its first year, the program had a 60% employment rate for participants, among the highest in the nation. Dress for Success-Des Moines won the competitive "Rookie Affiliate of the Year Award" by Dress for Success WorldWide, which supports more than 130 affiliates nationwide.

Realizing that her business acumen, knowledge and experience could be applied to the nonprofit world with transformative results, Jill left the corporate world for non-profit service.

In April 2014, Jill became involved in the refugee community in Iowa through her work as a business developer at Visiting Nurse Services of Iowa (VNS). Jill joined VNS to launch Community Voices, an interpretation services business that would expand VNS' interpretation program to help non-English speaking refugees and immigrants increase access to critically needed services. Jill developed the business plan, created the suite of marketing materials, established billing and scheduling processes, executed community outreach, obtained clients and was responsible for relationship management of those clients. Jill also ensured that interpreters were given the support, training and resources to succeed. Green Stone, a healthcare interpreter, remarked, "Jill personally modeled to me the way to be a better employee, public speaker, and interpreter. I appreciate Jill's passion for helping the refugee



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community and making life better for everyone in our community.” In two years, Community Voices earned the business of more than 25 Iowa organizations and grossed more than \$160,000 in revenue to support the mission of Visiting Nurse Service.

Jill also lead efforts to launch the “Refugee and Immigrant Guide” program while at VNS, a pilot program that focused on supporting refugee families who become system involved with child welfare or juvenile court. Jill advocated for families as they navigated these cumbersome and complex systems and strove to increase the cultural competency of DHS and juvenile court staff, enabling the agencies to work more effectively with refugee families and increase successful outcomes for the families. Yonas Testfastion, Eritrean refugee community leader, said, “I never seen someone like Jill, her commitment, initiative, and openness makes her unique.”

Having admired Jill’s talents and tenacity as a colleague, I was thrilled when Jill accepted my offer to be the Director of Communications and Fund Development at EMBARC: Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center, a grassroots non-profit founded by and for refugees. Although EMBARC is a fledgling three-year old organization with in-kind office space in a converted storage room, and spotty internet and heat, Jill choose to join our team because she believes she can make a difference. I know she can, and will.

I recently asked Jill why she is so passionate about advocating for the marginalized, and being a voice for the voiceless. She credits her husband Alex, who she has been with since she was 18. Alex grew up very poor with an addict for a mother, was in and out of foster homes, and struggled in school. Yet, he overcame again and again to succeed in work and life. Jill says Alex taught her the most important lesson: be fearlessly generous – jump in and help, don’t wait for someone to tell you how. Make a difference in a life any way you can – you never know what it will mean to someone.

I know that Jill makes a difference because of who she is and what she does. I hope that you will also recognize her leadership and accomplishments with the honor of choosing her to be in the 40 under 40 class of 2017.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Henny Ohr", is written over a horizontal line.

Henny Ohr
Executive Director