

THE IRISH TIMES

Business **This** Week

FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 2007



BELTWAY DIARY

Caroline Casey

Changing our world

We're a disparate bunch, the Eisenhower Fellows - 25 people from countries including Chile, China, Finland, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Japan and India - who are in the US for two months to examine and refocus professional goals in the context of taking the lead in our various fields of business or society.

The purpose of the programme is to get emerging leaders from around the world to exchange ideas and experiences. It is funded by the Eisenhower Fellowship, a foundation established in 1953 and supported by private donations and endowments.

Despite the vast differences among fellows in background, career, culture, political beliefs and, in some cases, language, we have found a commonality - a sense of humour and an enormous ability to talk. This is no place for the shy and retiring.

For the next two months we will travel the length and breadth of the US, with a well-planned daily itinerary involving meetings with leaders related to our own areas of interest.

One of the areas I am working

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on is the field of social entrepreneurship. A relatively new term in Ireland, social entrepreneurs are to society what business is to an economy. They are the drivers of change. A year ago I first heard the term and subsequently found myself being described as a social entrepreneur. Instantly it made sense. Finally a job title with which I could identify.

So what is social entrepreneurship? In short, it marries business know-how with social reform. Like traditional entrepreneurship, there is no endgame. Rather than leaving problems for government or business sectors to solve, social entrepreneurs find what is not working and solve the problem by changing the system, spreading the solution and per-

suading societies to take new steps.

In essence social entrepreneurs apply the same skills as a business entrepreneur, but success is measured in social impact rather than financial gain alone. To truly understand a social entrepreneur you must fully understand entrepreneurship.

Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, and Muhammad Yunus, who was awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for his microcredit strategy, are just some of the better known social entrepreneurs.

With me on the Eisenhower fellowship are two other social

entrepreneurs - David Ndi from Kenya, a co-founder of the Kenyan Leadership Institute, and Supinya Klangnarong from Thailand, a founder of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform.

After my first week here in Philadelphia, I made a whistle-stop 36-hour trip back to Dublin to speak at the Forum on Social Entrepreneurship, where Bill Drayton - the man who coined the term social entrepreneur - was the keynote speaker.

Mr Drayton is the founder of Ashoka, the global organisation identifying and investing in leading social entrepreneurs and helping them achieve maximum social impact.

What he highlighted was that a really good idea in the hands of a social entrepreneur can have an extraordinary impact and that social entrepreneurs are the engines of social change and role models for the citizen sector.

The turnout by so many Irish business leaders at the forum - many of whom have reached the pinnacle of corporate careers - demonstrates how acutely aware we are becoming of the need to strike the right balance between business and society and the interaction and contribution of people between both. We are now ready to build a sector that supports and encourages social entrepreneurship.

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