

The heart of a universal pulse

Jensine Larsen created World Pulse to channel the voices of women, setting in motion a profound global activism for peace and equality

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Jensine Larsen, CEO and founder of World Pulse, will tell you that she is innately shy. And to listen to the soft timbre of her voice when she speaks, you might believe her. But listen for a minute. There is nothing shy about Jensine Larsen.

In fact, she is a river of inspiration and information that flows through the Internet cafes and cables and radiates from Wi-Fi to landline, from urban to rural landscapes. Larsen has brought the pulse of the women of the world together into one magnificent heartbeat: World Pulse, a global media network she founded in 2004.

At that time, it was a print magazine, but Larsen knew that her vision for a global network would have to go digital to survive, but also to facilitate a forum for the tens of thousands of women's voices that came as word about the World Pulse community spread. Today, women leaders and citizen journalists from the World Pulse community are having their voices heard. Three of these women are speaking this weekend in Portland along with Larsen at private and public events, including the Oregon Chapter of the International Women's Forum. More information about upcoming events are available online at worldpulse.com.

Sue Zalokar: At 19 you went to the Amazon and worked with indigenous women who were struggling with oil contamination on their traditional lands. That must have been transformative. How does a 19-year-old woman from rural Wisconsin land in the Amazon?

Jensine Larsen: I was born with a global soul. I was raised on international folktales from my father. I always knew I had to get out in the world and learn from the truth — from women. Growing up as a young woman, I felt I was being lied to by the newspapers and the radio and the T.V. I was hungry to get out into the world.

I worked odd jobs. I saved my own money because my family couldn't afford to send me to college or send me anywhere. I saved up for my own travel and I went down there. I just had a calling to get out into the world that I couldn't suppress.

S.Z.: That calling led you to be an international journalist. Did you set out to be a journalist?

J.L.: I have no formal training as a journalist. I just love to write and I love to learn about the world. I did have some years in college with international studies, but I just started writing about the issues — in particular about indigenous struggles around the world and how could these most marginalized voices actually be influencing and changing some of the most powerful forces in the world.

S.Z.: Were you blogging it then?

J.L.: There was not much blogging at that time really. I had pieces published in the progressive press in the U.S., like "The Progressive," "The Nation." I had my work published in academic journals and also in the Thai press.

S.Z.: How has your life experience and work as a journalist influenced your work with the World Pulse community and global media network?

J.L.: For me there was no greater joy and sense of purpose that I have felt in my life than when I was holding a microphone (for) or I was asking a question to a woman and expecting to hear back her vision and her perspective. I always felt like, this is it. This is what the world needs to hear.

I got to a certain point as a journalist where I didn't want to be interpreting or be the filter for these voices. I don't want to be a messenger for these women, even though



Jensine Larsen, second from left, shares a moment with World Pulse correspondents (left to right) Martha Llano, Beatrice Achieng and Sarvina Kang.

connections happen. That is a microcosm of what happens on the World Pulse website.

S.Z.: Net neutrality. What does the potential loss of it mean for the World Pulse community? How about the digital community at large?

J.L.: It's major issue for the future of information and democratic participation for humanity. And it would affect the World Pulse community because the majority of women there already struggle with access: low bandwidth, long load times, waiting in line for eight hours for an Internet cafe, sometimes forgoing meals to get online. And then there's censorship...

Women of the World Pulse community don't necessarily have extra resources to cope with longer bandwidth or more blocked sites. This is a revolution that is brewing. The more women that connect and understand what is happening to each other and the world. Last night, Jampa called it "emotional contagion."

It's emotional contagion to know that what's happening in your country — the widow stoning, the rape of infants, the oppression of women of color — is happening everywhere. You start to band together to stop it.

If we have a less free Internet, less free access, it does not bode well for this revolution of positive transformation led by women.

S.Z.: I imagine there must be a level of emotional/psychic exhaustion in this line of work — I feel it just as a reader. Equal parts glee and despair. A kind of universal anxiety or depression. How do you take care of your own mental health?

J.L.: On a general level, what I've learned is that connection is a renewing force. Even though you might be emotionally grieving or sad when you're connected to other people. You can be renewed.

For myself, personally, yes, I learned. I had my moment of epiphany. I was struggling to build World Pulse and I was a stressed out entrepreneur working late into the early morning. I had this moment when election violence was bursting in Kenya and women started popping up on our site writing about it. And one woman, Leah, she had found out my Skype and contacted me in the middle of the violence when her daughter was dodging bullets on the street and their crops were dry. She wrote me and she said, "Jensine! Why are you up so late? You must zoom off to bed. Don't worry. I'm holding the flame. I'm carrying the pulse. Rest."

It was this moment of realization. It was an enormous weight lifted off my shoulders. I knew that I wasn't alone and that even while I slept, there would be women on the other side of the world carrying the vision forward. And that even though I had the vision (for World Pulse) that perhaps this woman's vision was bigger than mine and would add to it and grow it and I didn't have to carry it all myself.

I realized it's not about helping other women around the world. I had every bit to gain from the work myself.

they were asking me to be one.

I just had this realization that I wanted to create a communication source where they could speak for themselves and be their own messengers and that that would actually be more powerful than me being a journalist and giving women the tools to speak for themselves and to get their own messages out into the world.

Increasingly, World Pulse moved from print to the World Wide Web. It was a few years of print. Newsstand sales were higher than average for a new publication. It was successful, and yet I knew it was not enough. We were not going to achieve true impact through a print vehicle because we couldn't distribute globally as cost effectively (as digital), and we didn't have enough page space for this tsunami of voices from women around the world.

S.Z.: I heard you say that, in fact, it was the emotional pain and tension you felt in the bodies of clients with whom you worked as a massage therapist that was the impetus for creating World Pulse after 9/11. Tell me about that.

J.L.: That was one of the impetuses. I know I'm a healer. I discovered that as a massage therapist. I could feel — after 9/11 — increased tension in people's bodies because of a fear that the rest of the world was going to attack us. I knew from being out in the world that most of the people in the world wanted to connect to us and have us be aware and change the ways in which

we were negatively impacting their lives. These women wanted to be friends and to connect.

I thought, if only I could find a way to help people in this country connect and understand that we can have profound relationships. Profound friendships. Profound, transformative activism by being connected to women directly.

S.Z.: The building of World Pulse has been kind of scaffolded. First it was a vision, a forum for women's voices around the world and way for women to connect with and support one another. Then add to that the release of the World Pulse print magazine. Then you went digital. Now, you are providing training, information and materials to women (and men) all over the world to become citizen journalists. What is a citizen journalist?

J.L.: A citizen journalist is really anyone who has a life perspective, an experience to share to the world. Now it is a time in the world where we need to hear from ordinary women. And not just as professionally trained journalists. We need have them feel confident in the power of their voices to matter, to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

By training women how to use these digital tools and at the same time providing them with a global community, a support network online to strengthen that confidence, we are opening up a whole new resource for the future of the planet: women's voice and participation.

S.Z.: One of your World Pulse members — a woman from Crimea — wrote: "Sometimes a woman with a laptop can be more powerful than a man with a gun." Can you give me an example of how women's voices are being heard through World Pulse?

J.L.: Yes. So many. Let's see if I can pick just one. All right: For example, one of the things that we do is a campaign every year around a key issue that is important to our global network. And this year we are doing "Women Weave the Web" campaign, which is women's solutions for increasing digital access and digital empowerment.

We received more than 700 submissions. We are delivering those voices to the top 30 technology companies in Silicon Valley. We're having in-depth workshops with their executives and we're bringing real women through the tour, into these executive suites to do work with these executives to inform their policies, their products and their work.

As a side result of that campaign, we've seen women from Nigeria get invited to major technology governance conferences. Women from our community are emboldened. They would have never done this before, but they were emboldened to get to those conferences, speak up about the need for tech access for their communities, and have actually started participating in committees in an ongoing way with policy makers in Nigeria to shape the Internet policy in that country.

S.Z.: Currently 50,000 women from 190

countries make up the World Pulse Community. Right now you are in the middle of a World Pulse Tour with three women leaders — Ynanna, Jampa and Olanike.

They are sharing their stories of connection and transformation with the world. That must be something — for these women leaders — to make a tour with World Pulse community through the United States. What is it like for you all?

J.L.: Oh my gosh! You couldn't be asking this at a more powerful time because we just had their first speaking engagement last night — which is always the most magical and the most nerve-racking.

They have two days of training with one of the best speaking coaches in the country. Also, it's a very emotional time to dig deep into the (women's) stories and gain confidence to share your truth to these audiences, some for the first time in the United States.

There is also bonding between the women because they have shared with each

other and supported each other through World Pulse and then the process of the training. That moment when they speak, we

don't know, they don't know exactly what's going to come out (of their mouths). But there is always emotion. There's power.

There's a buzz of connection afterwards. And last night, it went on for three hours. People just kept talking. I've never seen networking go on for three hours. Then the connections happen.

People went up to Ynanna and wanted to help

her with her business plan for her center for healing for women of color, for birthing healthy babies. Come up to her and say, "I know someone you should talk to." Or for someone like Jampa who wants to improve education for girls in Tibet, people from the audience will connect with her specifically and ask, "How can I help you?" After the event, after they speak their voice, then the

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