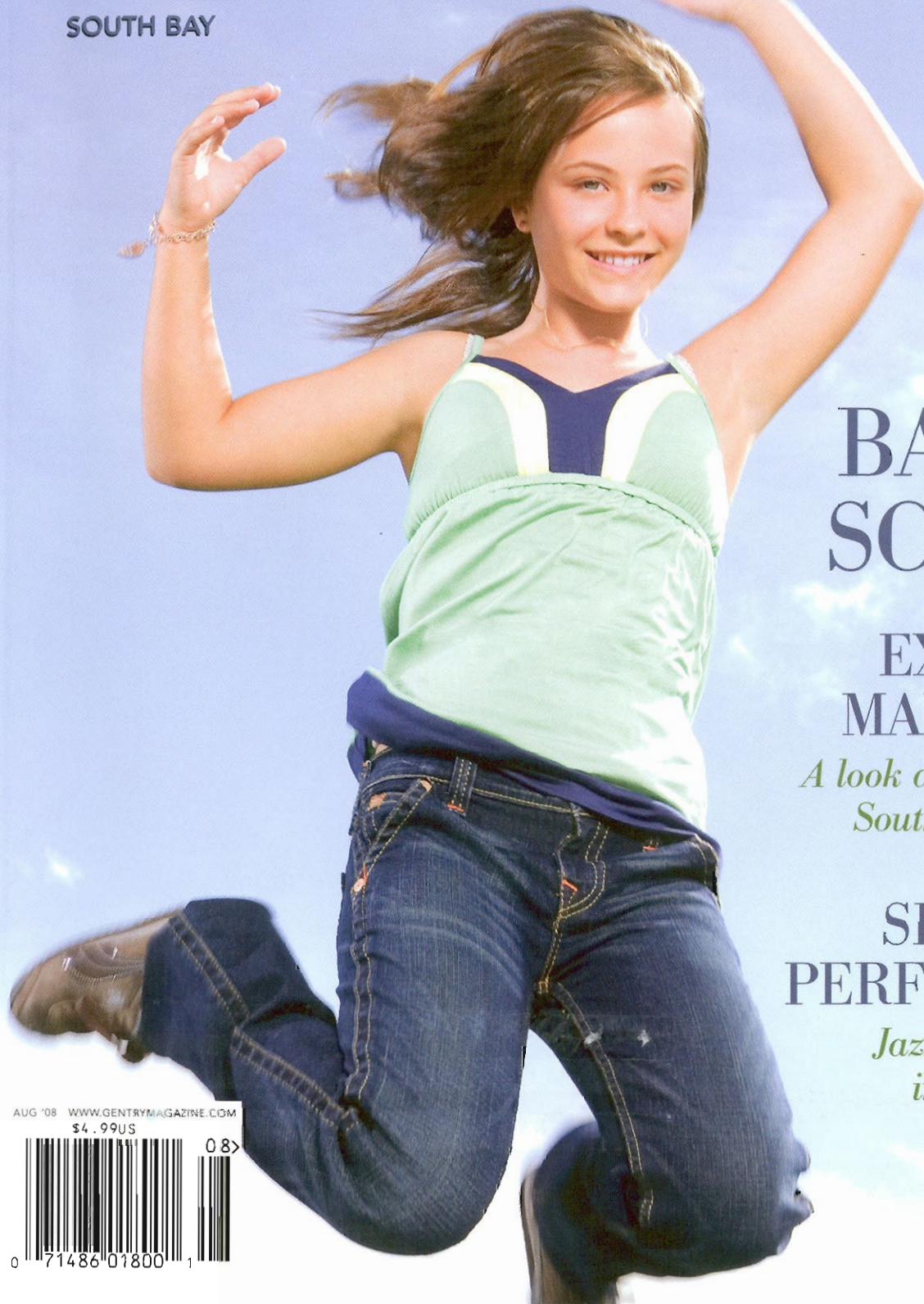


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# tuned in

If you think radios are a thing of the past, think again. Here's how one foundation's visionary work is using this classic mode of communication to ignite change and progress across rural communities in Africa and beyond.

TEXT BY LINDSAY SCHAUER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGE FULKERSON AND KRISTINE PEARSON

**R**attling down a dirt road in the West Pokot region of Kenya, Paige Fulkerson and Kristine Pearson's 4x4 vehicle makes its slow way toward their destination—a hot, dusty plateau where more than 600 local villagers anxiously await their arrival. With these two California natives is Olympic marathon runner and sponsor for their visit to the region, Tegla Loroupe. A local hero, Loroupe fell in love with running on these same pot-holed roads as a child, jogging 10 kilometers home from school each day to arrive before night fell on a landscape that still hasn't seen the dawn of electricity.

As the three women approach the plateau, children suddenly surround the vehicle, cheering and waving alongside them as they drive. A few hundred yards in the distance, a throng of people dance and sing in full-color ceremonial dress—some of whom have traveled several days on foot across the rural landscape to be there to greet them. “We have to get out to experience this,” says Pearson, a University of California graduate who has since emigrated to South Africa. As the women step from the car into the crowd of beaming children and walk the rest of the way beside them, Fulkerson takes a moment to soak in the experience—her first in the continent—and looks into the excited faces

around her. “I must have shaken a thousand hands,” the Menlo Park mom recalls. “And in all those faces, I could see they had such hope in their eyes for what we were doing.”

Precisely what these women were doing, what they had traveled to this arid region of Kenya in order to accomplish, was simple—to distribute 450 solar-powered, durable “Lifeline Radios” to selected villagers in the area as part of their work with the Freeplay Foundation. But as Pearson, the Foundation's CEO, already knew from her 19 years of experience in Africa, the effects of this simple service would prove to be extensive. By providing rural communities with a way to access basic information, from the weather forecast to educational programming about HIV/AIDS, these radios would transform and save thousands of lives.

“Everyone, whether rich or poor, needs access to information they can trust,” Pearson says, explaining that most rural communities, though culturally rich, have no electricity or batteries and thus no way to reach the plethora of basic information that is broadcast across their landscape, literally in the air around them. Without the literacy skills to read newspapers, if they have them at all, people in these regions live without the basic knowledge we find ourselves bombarded with daily in Silicon Valley.



"People who are geographically isolated are also informationally isolated," says Pearson. "We are providing them with a tool that opens a world to them that was previously closed."

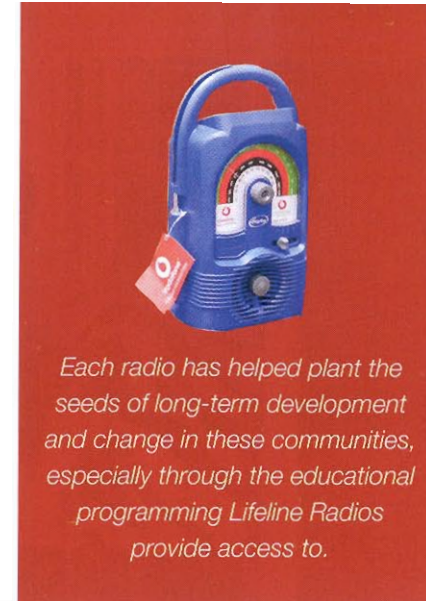
### A Radio is Born

The reality of the Lifeline Radio was set in motion in our own intellectually fertile Valley back in 2001 with the

their unique radio design. "Winning the award was one of those seminal moments in life—this was an idea whose time had come," she says. The award gave Freeplay the funding they needed to move forward. Using design input Pearson gathered from orphans in Rwanda and Kenya, Freeplay created the durable Lifeline Radio, shaped like a handbag for portability, that would have wide access to radio broadcasts across rural landscapes.

As they expected, Lifeline Radios were the missing link between isolated communities and the modern information age. "The moment the radios hit the ground, the demand for them has been overwhelming," says Director of External Affairs, Michelle Riley. "Almost every organization operating in Africa has a need for them." Freeplay also focuses heavily on getting radios to orphaned children, child-headed households, and women so that information gets into the hands of those who need it most. Working in partnership with local organizations, such as the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation, Pearson, Fulkerson, Riley, and the other six women across the globe who run the Freeplay Foundation have helped distribute 150,000 radios in the last four years.

Each radio has helped plant the seeds of long-term development and change in these communities, especially through the educational programming Lifeline Radios provide access to. Communities need not have a teacher or even a schoolroom in order to gather children around the radio for daily lessons, which are broadcast consistently for various grade levels. "Freeplay knows you need to do things from the bottom up, not the top down," says Riley. "These communities and these people don't want another handout, they want a hand up."



*Each radio has helped plant the seeds of long-term development and change in these communities, especially through the educational programming Lifeline Radios provide access to.*

striving to provide solar- and crank-powered lighting options that help families avoid burning hazardous fuels in order to light their communities. In addition, they are pushing to create MP3 capability in their radios so that programs can be recorded and played on demand. "The possibilities of what we can do are only limited to people's imaginations," Pearson says of Freeplay's efforts to further develop all of the technologies they dream of providing to the poorest in Africa.

### Lighting the Way

Night is falling across the Pokot region as Pearson, Fulkerson, and Leoroupe trek to the nearby Transzoya district to distribute the last of the Lifeline Radios. This final stop is to visit a doctor whose small health center is responsible for the medical care of over 50,000 people. With this new brilliantly blue device, he and his assistants will finally be able to access information about cholera epidemics in local water systems or disease outbreaks in surrounding areas. "This understaffed and over-extended doctor seemed keenly aware of the power this radio possessed," remembers Fulkerson.

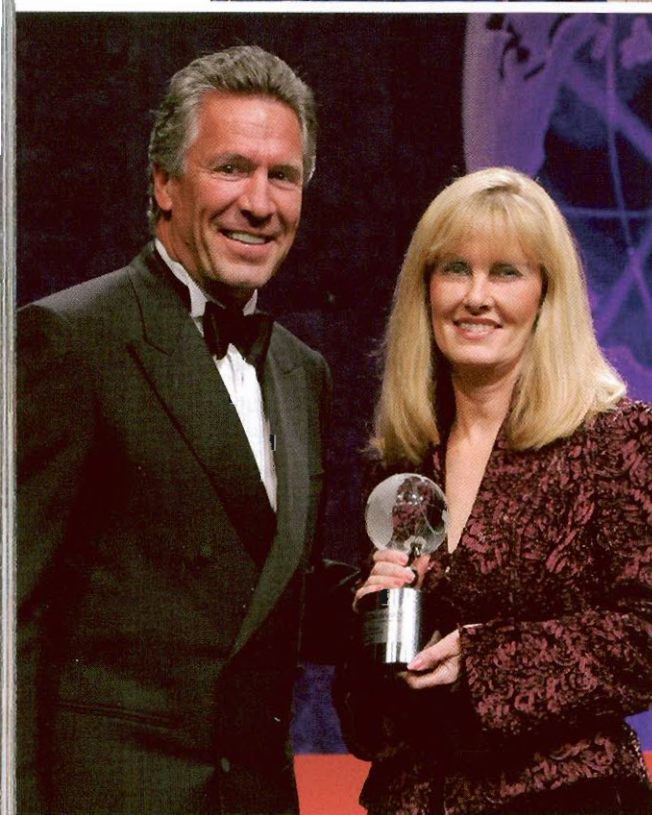
As the women retreat for the night, journeying back across the rural Kenyan terrain, Fulkerson looks out at the landscape and the dirt roads they drove across that morning. Not a single light twinkles in the distance, and few signs exist at all of the thousands of families that dwell amongst the mimosa trees and arid hillsides. "The people we met this morning," she says to Pearson, "they're walking back home without lights, aren't they." Pearson nods. "Yes, they'll be walking for days."

It's because of this dark reality that Freeplay has expanded its projects to work on bringing sustainable lighting systems to rural communities, in addition to their signature blue radios. With funding from their U.S. Ambassador, actor Tom Hanks, they are

### A Hopeful Future

Shortly after Pearson returned from Kenya to her work elsewhere in Africa and the world, and Fulkerson returned to Menlo Park and to her Freeplay fundraising efforts in Silicon Valley, news arrived of a violent conflict in the Pokot region the women visited. "We find hope though, because we know Lifeline Radios are out there now," says Fulkerson. "We get reports back that people have been saved by that alone, by broadcasts that warn them and tell them what to do, how to protect themselves." As developing nations and communities strive to achieve stability in an increasingly global world, it's been proven true that much reassurance and advancement can be achieved through the communication of basic yet vital information between us all.

With increased violence and unrest in Kenya, Fulkerson says many supporters and friends have asked if Freeplay will have to pull out their efforts there. "No. Now more than ever they need these radios, so we'll forge on," she says with resolve. "There's a lot that information can do to change a life." Fatima, a 60-year-old woman in Kenya who was the recipient of one of Freeplay's Lifeline Radios, echoes that sentiment best. "Yesterday, I didn't know anything," she said to Pearson as she held the blue, purse-shaped device for the first time. "But tomorrow, I will know everything." ■



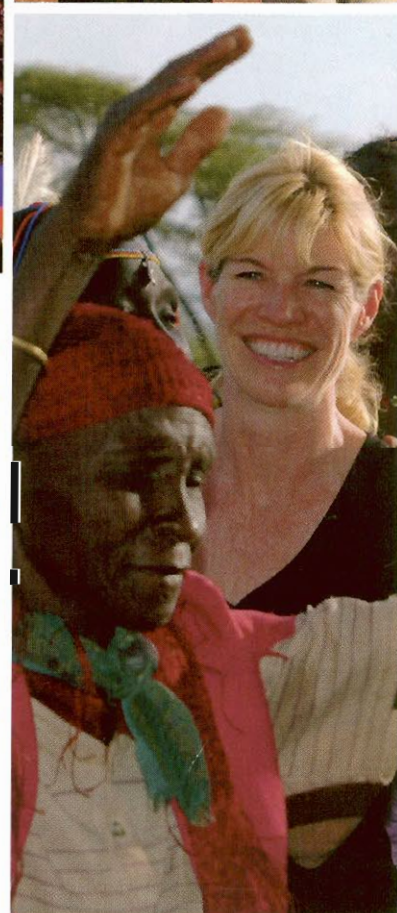
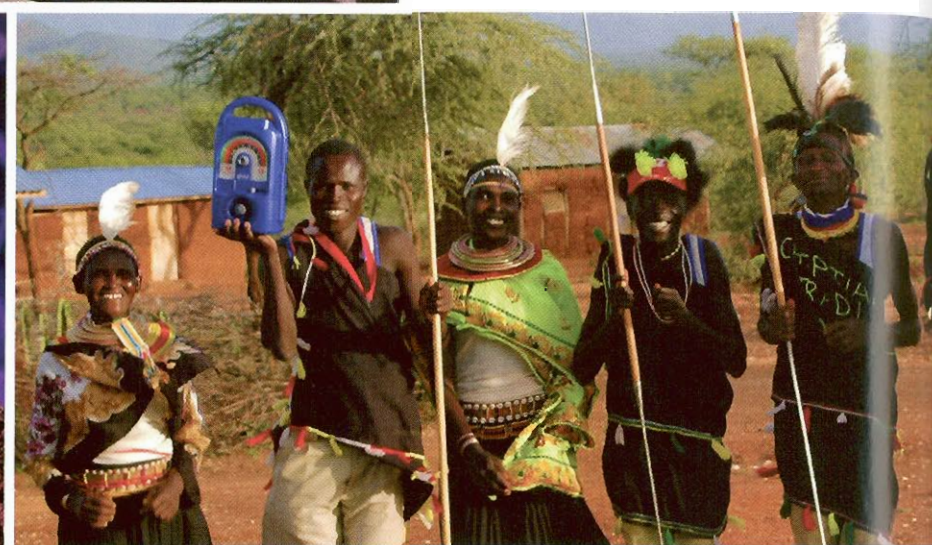
**PRECEEDING PAGE**  
Kenyan recipients of a Freeplay Lifeline Radio

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP**  
CEO Kristine Pearson shows Kenyan villagers how to operate a Lifeline Radio.

To this day, the Freeplay Foundation has distributed 150,000 radios, and counting, across rural areas of the world.

Menlo Park's Paige Fulkerson heads up West Coast fundraising efforts for Freeplay.

Pearson receives a Global Humanitarian Award from San Jose's Tech Museum of Innovation in 2005, presented by Mike Splinter.



San Jose Tech Museum of Innovation's first Technology Benefiting Humanity Awards. Pearson had begun working on the humanitarian projects that Freeplay Energy, a sustainable energy firm based in London and Johannesburg, was just launching. The concept of a solar- and crank-powered radio that could be used in rural communities across the world was an idea Freeplay had long dreamed of. "I learned about the deadline for the Tech Museum's award one day before it occurred," remembers Pearson. "We dropped everything to get our proposal for the Lifeline Radio together. We knew this award was made for us."

Up against many other innovative, mostly computer-centric ideas, Pearson says the Museum was visionary to appreciate the humanitarian work Freeplay meant to accomplish with