

Jolkona Foundation Focuses on the Big Impact of Giving Back, No Matter How Small the Donation

By Adnan Mahmud

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Jolkona Foundation focuses on the big impact of giving back, no matter how small the donation Web-based community targets younger generation, uses technology tools to connect donors to projects and track project progress

Seattle, WA -- Given the current economic landscape, people are watching their money more closely than ever. Despite tightening purse strings, philanthropy is alive and well. People want to help those less fortunate, maybe even more than ever, but with budgets shrinking and less to give, donors aren't sure their individual contributions can make a difference.

Adnan Mahmud believes it can. Mahmud, a program manager with Microsoft Corporation, was traveling in South Asia when he saw something that would change his life. At a cemetery in Bangladesh, he witnessed a man burying his seven-year-old son. The traditions call for rituals to be carried out for the burial—cleansing the body and wrapping it in clean white linen—but the man clearly didn't have the means to do so. Mahmud couldn't help but thought that it wouldn't have cost much to make a difference in that man's life.

During that same trip, Mahmud met with the director of a facility that provides artificial limbs to the handicapped. The program needed funding. Mahmud was willing to help, but wanted to be informed of the progress and see how his assistance would make an impact. The director suggested sharing “before-and-after photos” of the prosthetics recipient.

That sparked an idea in Mahmud. Given his background in technology—and knowing that he wasn't alone in wanting more control and a stronger connection to his giving activities—how could he take that idea of “proof” and transform it into a global solution to connect donors with deserving projects around the world.

The result was Jolkona Foundation (<http://www.jolkona.org>). Mahmud, along with Nadia Eleza Khawaja, an experienced non-profit professional currently pursuing a Master's in Public Health from the University of Washington, co-founded the not-for-profit organization which uses web technologies to create an online giving community that is changing the way people interact with charitable giving and manage their donations.

The duo selected the name Jolkona, which means “drop of water” in Bengali, because they believe that every drop counts—meaning that every donation, no matter how small, adds up to make a major impact.

“People want to know that their small donations count. They also find it challenging and time consuming to identify worthy projects,” says Mahmud. “We wanted to give donors an experience where they feel connected to the people they are helping.”

Jolkona Foundation is focused on a new class of donor, the younger generation, targeting individuals between the ages of 15 and 35. “This is the new face of philanthropist and we need to find a way to communicate the benefits of giving in a way that resonates with them,” offers Khawaja. “They are comfortable with the Internet, they are also savvy consumers, and they do want to get involved. Jolkona is a program that works with their lifestyle.”

Mahmud and Khawaja also wanted to provide donors more control over their allocations. At Jolkona.com, donors can choose from a variety of projects based on several filtering criteria including price, location, and focus area, and then easily and securely give to those projects they feel passionate about. Additionally, donors can monitor and track their giving activity—even receive “proofs” on the progress of their projects.

“Think of it like a 401k,” offers Mahmud. “You are contributing to your future so you want to be sure you are making smart, impactful investments. This is the same principle. Only instead of a retirement account, you are investing in making the world a better place for others,” he adds. “It is just as important when contributing to a charitable cause to make smart choices with strong ROI.”

Jolkona Foundation partners with charitable not-for-profit organizations to profile deserving projects on their site and help connect them with donors. The organization has a rigorous screening process and selects programs that they believe are of interest to their donor pool and complement their mission. The focus is on global projects in 5 categories: public health, education, environment, empowerment, cultural identity.

But the most important criteria is that the organization be committed to having 100 percent of the donations received from Jolkona Foundation go directly to program costs and that the organizations report back on the progress so that the donors can see first-hand and in detail how their donations are making an impact.

Because they are stringent about donations going directly to programs and not to Jolkona Foundation’s overhead costs, Jolkona Foundation also has a specific fund, called the Kona Fund, in which they target donations to help offset operational costs. “We keep our operating costs low, but there are still some costs of doing business that do need funding,” acknowledges Mahmud. “We created the Kona Fund as a way to account for those expenses but keep them completely separate from project-based donations. Again, this goes towards our belief that people should be able to see where their money is doing.”

Jolkona Foundation plans to reach out to schools, universities and other youth organizations to help build their donor base. They will also take advantage of social media and other youth-oriented technology platforms to help drive awareness and to forward their mission of connectedness.

“Many people don’t realize the powerful impact they can make with such small amounts and so often they just don’t get involved in supporting charitable programs,” says Khawaja. “By creating awareness and an opportunity to take action in a unique and meaningful way, we hope to make this problem more solvable. We believe that people, especially young people, can change the world...one small donation at a time.”

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