

## Johann Koss (MBA '04)

*The president and CEO of Right To Play and four-time Olympic gold medalist became involved in the non-profit organization after visiting the African country of Eritrea, where he was profoundly moved by the plight of its children.*

### Interview by Jennifer Hildebrandt

#### What led you to create Right To Play?



Seeing how destructive poverty, disease and war have been to children in countries like Eritrea, I wanted to create an organization whose goals included harnessing the best practices of sport (optimism, respect, compassion, courage and leadership) to empower these children to build healthier communities. For example, our *SportHealth* program teaches the importance of vaccinations, as well as prevention of TB, Malaria and HIV/AIDS.

#### Are there any links between your skills as an Olympic Athlete and those required to run Right To Play?

Perseverance is one of the most transferable traits I know of. As an athlete and social entrepreneur, I have used the relentless pursuit of my goals and the ability to transform my mistakes into learning experiences. The two other traits that I have taken from my life as an athlete are the ability to set high goals and teamwork.

Teamwork is not usually associated with speed skating, but while you compete as an individual, you are also part of a bigger entity. My teammates and I worked off of each others' successes, and that has given me an appreciation for harnessing my colleague's skills to benefit the whole organization.

#### In the aftermath of your [Executive] MBA, has your strategic and operational vision changed for Right To Play?

The changes are more related to Right To Play's growth as an organization. As CEO, you are responsible for everything in principle, but you can't do everything. As we grow, one of our challenges has been to move from a structure of 'doing everything' to one of defined roles. It's challenging to keep people motivated through these kind of changes.

#### You have said that Right To Play is on a quest to help five million children by 2012. What are some of the challenges to reaching this goal?

The main challenge will be achieving the scalability required to reach these children. We are doing the math right now on the number of people we will have to recruit locally, and the number of training sessions needed. Our ability to recruit and retain people in the field will be a big challenge, along with the usual financial constraints. We have great finance people who keep us on track, but at times it is difficult to anticipate the timing and amount of funding required ahead of time.

#### As a social entrepreneur, do you have any advice for people who are seeking a meaningful quest for their organizations?

I'd say two things: dare to think big, and get started now. Whether you are a social entrepreneur or a traditional entrepreneur, the critical driver is to create your purpose. Look at the founders of Google, Larry Page and Sergey Brin. They didn't talk about creating a ten-billion dollar business in the beginning. They were driven and motivated by starting a search engine that would be the best in the world. Your purpose needs to be broader than a return on investment, because you will be putting so much time and energy into your venture.

#### You are also on the board of "MOT" (Courage), which mobilizes athletes in the fight against drugs and doping; Time Magazine has named you "One of 100 Future Leaders of Tomorrow"; and last year the World Economic Forum named you a Young Global Leader. If you have any downtime, what do you enjoy doing?

It's very important for me to have regular downtime, which usually includes running or watching movies. On my holidays I like to go to the mountains to ski or hike. In the spring I visited Selkirk, B.C. to back-country ski.

#### How does it feel to know that Right To Play is making a difference to the worlds' most marginalized children?

What motivates me – and I think, many of our staff – is seeing the impact of programs such as *Play to Learn* in Rwanda, Benin, Mali and Ghana, where we work with partner organizations and teachers to address educational challenges such as school retention, quality of learning resources, gender equality and inclusion, as well as effective HIV/AIDS prevention. Catching a child's smile or hearing them tell us how a program has changed their life, family, community, or even how they believe in themselves, is incredibly satisfying, and lies at the heart of our mission. **R**