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## HOW SHE DOES IT - KAREN TSE

*42, founder and CEO, International Bridges to Justice, Geneva, Switzerland; mom of two*



*By: Katherine Lee, Photo: Marc Royce*

It's 6:00 a.m., and Karen Tse is at home in Geneva, Switzerland, fielding calls from government officials and advisors in Asia and the United States who can help in her life's mission: defending human rights. An hour later, husband Alex Wong, 40, gets their 3-year-old son, Noah, ready for school while Karen nurses their 8-month-old, Nathaniel. Most days, work and family are pretty much interwoven for this attorney and founder of International Bridges to Justice (IBJ), which develops criminal defense systems in emerging nations. Mealtimes, however, are sacred and reserved for family. "I don't take calls," Karen asserts. "I don't even like to talk about work during family time."

But when she's on the job, Karen is immersed in her mighty fight for human rights—thanks in no small part to her trusted caregiver, Julia. ("Any woman who has a child should automatically get a twelve percent raise so she can get quality child care," Karen says.) Six years ago, Karen founded IBJ to provide training and support to public defense attorneys in emerging countries. The goal: equip them so they can help the tens of thousands of people each year that Karen estimates are tortured or detained without due process or representation—innocent people in flawed, overwhelmed or corrupt criminal justice systems. Her organization has assisted thousands of legal-aid advocates around the world, spurring changes that have improved the lives of countless men, women and children in China, Vietnam and Cambodia. IBJ is also expanding in developing countries such as Paraguay and Zimbabwe.

Karen's impressive results weren't always easy to come by. Her work has often forced her out of her comfort zone. "To establish IBJ, I had to push myself to do things that were not part of my core strength, such as asking for money," she says. "But it's like parenting—you do what you have to do for your baby."

Since its inception, this "baby" has been steadily nurtured. Born in 2000, IBJ experienced an important growth spurt in 2002, when Karen was awarded a Public Service Fellowship from Echoing Green, an organization that seeks to spark social change by recognizing and supporting the world's most exceptional emerging leaders and their organizations. The grant—two \$30,000 payments over two years—provided funds that "were significant in helping launch International Bridges to Justice," she says.

In many ways, building the organization is something Karen has been destined for. She remembers harboring a passion to help people as a young child growing up near Los Angeles, where she was born and lived with her Hong Kong-born immigrant parents and two older brothers. Her parents had ties to Chinatown, so Karen was raised hearing stories about human rights abuses in Asia—and what she heard left its mark. "I think children are much more sensitive than adults to injustice," says Karen. "My kids have a very strong sense of right and wrong."

Karen knew what she wanted to do with her life, but it wasn't clear how she would do it. After graduating from Scripps College in Claremont, CA, in 1986, Karen was at a crossroads. "My heart said go to divinity school, while my practical side said law school," she says. Unsure of the right decision, she spent the next year teaching at refugee camps in Hong Kong and Thailand. It was at these camps that she met refugees who had been falsely imprisoned, and she began to see a connection between criminal justice and human rights abuses. Her decision about the future then crystallized: Karen deferred admission to Harvard Divinity School and enrolled in law school. Shortly after graduating from UCLA Law, Karen heard about a need for attorneys in Cambodia. The murderous reign of the Khmer Rouge, which decimated the ranks of the country's educated population, had left Cambodia with fewer than ten attorneys. So in 1994 she relocated to help train the country's first group of public defenders.

What Karen encountered in Cambodia became the catalyst for the formation of IBJ six years later. "I saw children and women in prisons," she recalls. "When I'd ask, 'Why are you here?' I would hear stories like 'I've been locked up for ten years because my husband committed a crime and the authorities couldn't find him, so they jailed me instead.'" Developing countries use torture because "it is the easiest and cheapest form of investigation."

Karen's ability to combat abuses she sees around her might explain, in part, the positive energy that radiates from

her. Each day, she sees suffering, yet she remains hopeful. She says she draws inspiration from people like Vishna, whom she met in a Cambodian prison.

Vishna, 4 years old when Karen met him, had been born in prison because his mother was a prisoner. The guards had known him since birth, so they'd let him slip in and out of the prison bars. Every day, the boy would run to the other prisoners and poke his fingers through the bars to say hi. For them, says Karen, seeing Vishna was what they looked forward to most. "Here was this boy born in a prison who had nothing but his own sense of heroic mission in life, the instinct to do what he could to help others," says Karen. "If we can all stand up like Vishna and say, 'I will do the one thing I can do,' then we can change the world."

Karen found that her way to stand up was through IBJ. Yet something else, she reveals, helped her in this quest. "IBJ would not be where it is today if I hadn't become pregnant," she says. Motherhood taught Karen to let go. "Before I became a mother, I worked around the clock and changed things nine hundred times. Learning to let go was a tremendous gift to my work because it helped me realize I'm not indispensable and I don't have to be everywhere, and that helped the organization expand." Being a parent also taught her to set limits. "It gave me the balance I needed," she adds.

Prior to this epiphany, Alex made sure Karen ate at least one good meal a day on her way to save the world. "I was so completely obsessed with work that I'd just eat quick things like raw vegetables," Karen says. "Alex actually prepared food, and I thought, That's it; he's the one." The couple met six years ago at the bike racks at Harvard, where she'd followed through on her divinity degree and Alex was attending the John F. Kennedy School of Government. "I liked that—I was on a bike and he was on a bike, too," says Karen. They've been riding together since. Today Alex, who is Chinese Canadian, is a director at the World Economic Forum, an independent, nonpolitical organization working with leaders on global, regional and industry agendas to improve the world. Karen finds that sometimes, when she see the terrible things that are possible in this world, she worries about her own children. "I do this thing with Noah. I tell him to close his eyes and take a deep breath eight times. Then when he hits eight, I say, 'What do you see?' and he says 'Mommy,' and I say, 'I love you, Noah.' Then I ask him, 'How much?' and he says, 'Big much. I can feel you, Mommy.' And I tell him I will always be with him."

As for what she offers to the rest of the world, Karen says, "I know I may not see the effects of everything I'm doing, and maybe no one person is enough to bend the arc of history, but I hope that our work will help generations to come." Just imagine: Each person who reads this—perhaps three million people—does something for someone else, and that someone inspires another person. As Karen has shown us, that's how one person can move mountains.

### **Spotlight on Karen**

#### **Greatest challenge**

My bag has baby food and used napkins mixed in with legal documents and business cards. It's all I can do to get around in the real world, and then when you add two kids, it's madness.

#### **Best solution**

Accept that this is part of being a working mother. Target action in specific areas. Know you can't achieve everything all the time, have fun with what you're doing, and do the best you can.

Karen Tse and the five mothers profiled [here](#) are all fellows of the nonprofit Echoing Green, a global social venture fund that provides seed funding and technical assistance to individuals looking to start innovative organizations that attack long-standing social problems. Echoing Green has supported more than 400 visionaries working to spark social change in 30 countries. For more information, visit [www.echoinggreen.org](http://www.echoinggreen.org) or email Lara Galinsky at [lara@echoinggreen.org](mailto:lara@echoinggreen.org).

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