Maya Ajmera – Senior Advisor in Social Entrepreneurship

By Whitney L.J. Howell

When Maya Ajmera stepped onto a train platform in Bhubaneswar, India, as a new college graduate in 1990, she saw something unexpected that immediately altered her life.

Before she sat 50 children who lived, played, and worked around the train platform, huddling around a young, energetic teacher who used flashcards to teach them to read and write.

“The teacher said these children were at the platform daily, so instead of getting them to school, she brought school to them. Every day, they sat in a circle and learned to read and write and got a hot meal,” Ajmera said. “It cost $400 yearly to teach 50 kids with two teachers and provide a hot meal a day. That’s when I experienced my ‘moment of obligation.’ At 22, I wondered how I could bring about more of these train platform schools.”

Ajmera returned to North Carolina with this desire and, bypassing her original plan to attend medical school, started classes at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy. Her plan was to launch the Global Fund for Children (GFC), a non-profit organization that supports grassroots efforts to improve the lives, health, and well-being of children worldwide. She discussed her goals with then-professor William Ascher, Ph.D., and he gave her the resources needed – desk space and a telephone – to get started.

She soon earned a 4-year, $100,000 fellowship from Echoing Green, a General Atlantic initiative that supports young entrepreneurs working for social change. She used the money to publish her first children’s book – Children from Australia to Zimbabwe – and rolled those profits into her first grant, sending $4,000 to India to fund train platform school creation.

Between 1993 to 2011, Ajmera, who now leads Society for Science & the Public, co-authored more than 40 children’s books that have reached 5 million readers. To date, GFC has invested more than $35 million of those profits into 600 non-governmental organizations, impacting the lives of 9 million children globally.

For example, GFC was also the first group to support the Afghan Institute of Learning, an organization that began by training women to be teachers. Grant money went to a man who created a boat school for children who lived in flood-prone areas of Bangladesh – he now operates more than 80 such schools. Additionally, GFC funds bolstered Nyaka, a program in Uganda that works to provide a healthier, more stable life for AIDS orphans.

Ultimately, Ajmera hopes her career path inspires others to consider an entrepreneurial life – one that involves innovative thinking and creative approaches to solving the world’s problems. But, she said, her accomplishments might not have happened had she not had the proper support herself.

“Duke incubated me. I had an incredibly supportive mentor during a time when supporting social entrepreneurship was very new,” Ajmera said. “It’s important to have the right people around you to be
your posse so you can have inspiration to do your work. The support that students get at Duke is different from other universities.”