By Peter Shi T’16

Pamela Hawley is founder and CEO of UniversalGiving, an online nonprofit organization whose vision is to “create a world where giving and volunteering are a natural part of life.” Based in San Francisco, UniversalGiving focuses on matching volunteers and donors with global opportunities, as well as raising money for international charities through its web-based marketplace. She is also the co-founder of VolunteerMatch, a nonprofit has paired over two million volunteers with non-profits. In her free time, she enjoys doing improv acting. Link to her full bio here.

Our Conversation with Pamela Hawley

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about how your role models have shaped you to become the person who you are today.

**PH:** I was born and raised in sunny Menlo Park into a loving family. My mother encouraged me to help people just by the way she lived. She is always a great listener with great insights. She encouraged me to volunteer, help people, listen to them, and consistently serve the community. This has been an amazing model for me throughout my life. My father is one of the most amazing, ethical businessmen and most joyful people that I know; he has always been present in my life and an amazing force for good. When I wanted to volunteer, they both jumped on it and fully supported me.

On the Social Entrepreneurship side, I have to thank Peter Samuelson, founder of Starbright and Starlight and Everyone Deserves a Roof, for introducing me to social entrepreneurship over 20 years ago. He is a fantastic mentor, board member, and friend.

Currently, I also have a spiritual board of advisors – a group of people who help me to live in the highest integrity as a person and to be spiritually aligned with who I want to be as a professional and person. I ask them to share lessons with me and guide me through challenging situations.

**Duke I&E:** How has Duke impacted the way that you approach social entrepreneurship?

**PH:** Duke definitely has a special place in my heart. I remember a pivotal moment in high school when I nearly sending my acceptance notification to Stanford in the mail, but I just couldn’t do it. At Duke, there is this incredible sense of joy, community, and work hard, play hard environment. I’m grateful for the volunteer opportunities I’ve had in Durham, as well as the lifelong friendships that I’ve been fortunate enough to cultivate along the way. In fact, my roommate and I still leave voicemails about our day to each other, every day.
As with my friendships at Duke, here at UniversalGiving, we cherish people like they would like to be cherished. We have an individual holistic vision for each one of our employees — for example, one of our employees in marketing has published 2 books on the side as a writer, and she writes for half a day one day per week. Another employee in design does side projects on her own, and so she has a flex schedule.

**Duke I&E: How do you define entrepreneurship?**

**PH:** First of all, for anyone who is doing innovation and entrepreneurship, I think what you are doing is great! My heart just fills with humble pride. Entrepreneurship allows people to carve a better life for themselves and for others. I just got chills, because it’s so inspiring to me. It’s about saying — “There’s something out there that doesn’t exist yet, and I am so relentlessly called to do it that I cannot stop doing it.” I have to pursue it.

Doing entrepreneurship shapes you as a person, because you do not have a choice. For people unsure about whether to become an entrepreneur, it’s probably not a good fit. This is a calling, and it can be very challenging. Entrepreneurs, even in their most challenging moments, still love it. You are not giving up. There’s a very special ethos around entrepreneurship.

I don’t even know how to make a job transition from being an entrepreneur to being something else. It’s just something that is in your soul. I think about it in all areas of life: I always think about how to improve things. Even if it’s on a very small, meaningful level, I want to find ways to change people’s lives.

For example, while I was in L.A., I was disturbed by all of the homeless people that I saw. I created a homeless card with a 1-800 number that listed all of the shelters in the area and a card with a quote that, in essence, said we cared and they were loved and valued as a person. Whenever I saw a homeless person, I said hi, smiled, and left them with this card.

**Duke I&E: How did you come up of the idea behind UniversalGiving?**

**PH:** While I was on a family trip to Mexico at age 12, I remember seeing starving, begging children on the cul-de-sac. My jaw dropped, and I was shocked and surprised. I thought to myself, “Why was the crisis in Zimbabwe and the women in Peru with six children and no jobs not on the front page of the news?” After that, I started volunteering as a student—I volunteered in the earthquake crisis in El Salvador, microfinance in India, and sustainable farming in Guatemala.

I slowly realized that many people don’t know what it’s like to get food from a restaurant, let alone get food or have a job, calling, and education. I asked myself, “Do I want to continue to be causeless, or do I want to create a marketplace to provide jobs for thousands of people throughout the world? I chose the latter, and I chose to do it on a large scale. To date, we’ve matched
nearly 10,000 volunteers and over 34 million dollars worth of volunteer hours. We use a social return on investment to track volunteer hours, and we value on volunteer hour at 20 dollars.

**Duke I&E: Has your vision for UniversalGiving’s values changed? If so, how?**

**PH:** At UniversalGiving, we understand the value of always staying humble and never stop growing. Every night I pray, and I think that that spiritual practice is important. I think it’s important for everyone to have some kind of practice, such as yoga, walks in nature, or a meaningful conversation with a friend. We treasure peace building as a way to building and sustain global connections.

Our vision has stayed the same over the years: we want an intimate community at UniversalGiving. Donors and volunteers are a part of our culture and we know them personally. They aren’t just a part of a marketplace. The same is for our team. We value always staying humble, cherishing and honoring your team. It’s only not about the individual, but about honoring the individual in the context of the team. So with both our clients and our team, we want to keep our vision to “Create a World Where Giving and Volunteering Are a Natural Part of Everyday Life.”

One of the biggest lessons I’ve learned is to not make decisions based on personal feeling, but on principle. When you make management decisions based on principle, on what’s true and objective, that is kind and fair; but when you do it just based on feeling and what’s personal, it doesn’t work. Intuition does play a strong role, but intuition is still based on principle, since you are still listening to that inner voice of truth. Paying too much attention on personal angst or feeling does not lead to the best results.

**Duke I&E: What were some of the key challenges that you’ve faced along the way?**

**PH:** My first four years after Duke were really hard. At age 25, I had been through a series of jobs in PR, Marketing, Broadcasting, fired as a waitress, and as a step aerobics instructor. At the age of 25, I was so depressed. I was circumstantially depressed, because I was not doing something that I loved to do, and it was literally killing me. I was in tears all of the time. I wish there was magic pill I could take to make the pain go away. I was just devastated. I felt like I couldn’t accept my job unless it fit my calling.

A year later, I co-founded VolunteerMatch, and I became a social entrepreneur before I know what a social entrepreneur was. My next challenge was learning management skills with UniversalGiving. We had a very challenging situation early on where we were going head to head with another organization with a similar name. I was really young, and I had to choose between fighting for a name because it’s right on principle and fighting for my mission, which is also
based on principle. Those are the real crucibles that leaders have to face along their path. Those are the kinds of things that shape leaders.

In fact, I recently read a piece called: “Rough: A Social Entrepreneur’s Journey.” It’s about fighting about what you love to do and the joy and full that that will give you. A lot of people say, “I don’t have this, but I need it. Well, sometimes that opportunity comes later in life. For instance, Mary Baker Eddy founded the Christian Science Monitor at age 90. It often takes time.

**Duke I&E:** What is one thing that could help aspiring innovators and entrepreneurs?

**PH:** Make a list of the top five things that you would like to get done every day.