

Incubating eco-careers

Jenna Ringelheim '02 knows a lot about leadership. The former anthropology and environmental-studies major is the executive director of Wild Gift, an Idaho-based program for exceptional leaders in their twenties. The organization helps the young leaders devise and launch a project that “promotes the stewardship of wild nature and the development of sustainable communities.” Wild Gift selects five applicants per year to receive up to \$15,000 each and take part in a seventeen-month program, including a twenty-day “deep wilderness experience” in Idaho or



Alaska. Grant recipients are taught and mentored by experts in ecology and climate-change research as well as business and strategic planning.

According to Ringelheim, Wild Gift supports the ideas of “better-world entrepreneurs”—think of it as not-for-profit venture capitalism. The goal is

“to support a lifelong commitment to leadership that benefits humankind and the natural environment and to build an expanding network of leaders who provide a collective wisdom and are a resource for individual and collaborative leadership projects.”

Wild Gift’s funding of leadership action projects often serves to kick-start budding careers in environmental sustainability. Ringelheim herself was a beneficiary of the Wild Gift pilot program in 2003. After earning a master’s in environmental policy and planning from Tufts University and working for the Boston office of the Trust for Public Land, she became Wild Gift’s first executive director in 2007. Now she uses the skills she honed as a grant recipient to oversee the entire operation.

Ringelheim calls her work “fulfilling and inspiring” and takes pride in being able to show young leaders with an interest in sustainability that they can indeed make a difference in the world. She credits Skidmore with teaching her that if she works hard, great things can happen. “In school,” she recalls, “that translated into interesting internships, an amazing study-abroad experience, and becoming the first environmental-studies major to graduate from Skidmore.”

For more on Wild Gift, visit www.wildgift.org.
—Robin Adams '00