

# The Sonder Project

BY ALDEN MAHLER LEVINE

In Florida's impressive climate, things that start small can get big fast. That's certainly been true of The Sonder Project, a global nonprofit founded on 30-A in the spring of 2015. What started out as a company committee to help organize employees' local volunteer hours has become an independent organization with the lofty goal of "ending extreme poverty and fighting hunger around the world".

It all began with the Community Committee at 360 Blue Properties, according to Ashley Hamm, CEO of the local property-management company and a co-founder of The Sonder Project. "Honestly, faster than you could ever imagine, it just kind of evolved," she says. "We brought in other people from the community and decided we wanted to branch this thing off and make it its own nonprofit."

It soon became clear that other 30-A businesses were interested in getting in on the action. In meetings with partners at 30a.com and YOLOBoard, Sonder Project staff noticed a pattern. "We had created the blueprint for something they wanted to be part of," Hamm remembers. "I think we had a lot of the same visions and a lot of the same purpose... to help bring awareness to some of the stuff going on in the world outside of our small community." In late 2015, YOLO and 30a.com became official founding partners of The Sonder Project.

The fledgling charity embraced a concept called the Millennial Villages approach, first tested by the United Nations in 2004. Rather than, say, worrying about education across a continent, this approach focuses on education, water, health, gender equality, and a variety of other issues in a single smaller place. It helps make the biggest possible impact, Hamm says. "We're not just building a school and then leaving." The team's first project was building a school in Roure, a village in Burkina Faso; but that was just the beginning. The charity now estimates it has provided water to over 7,000 people, classrooms to over 650 children, and deworming medication to over a million people in total.

The key, Hamm says, is the partnerships. "There are great organizations that already exist," Hamm says. "Rather than go in and try to reinvent the wheel, we take a high-impact philanthropy approach, which is where your dollar goes the furthest." Donors can track down a



Ashley Hamm



different charity to address each of their interests – or, through The Sonder Project, they can address a number of issues in one place. As The Sonder Project's administrative costs are covered by its founding partners, Hamm says, 100% of those donations go to projects on the ground.

And those projects aren't all in Africa. "There are people outside of what we call our 'bubble' right here in the panhandle, just outside of our local community, who live well below the poverty range," Hamm points out. As one way to address those needs, The Sonder Project has developed relationships with over 50 property-management companies around the United States and helps connect them with appropriate local charities. Through the partner management companies, renters are asked to pack up non-perishable food items they no longer want at the end of their stay in a special bag provided by The Sonder Project. That food is then routed



to hungry residents nearby – over 1,000 pounds of food donated so far.

Hamm is personally proudest of The Sonder Project's ability to bring awareness of the world to people close to home. "I really like the idea of just sharing the stories – which is the whole point of our name," she says. The charity's name was chosen from among suggestions from participants, friends, and family, several of whom suggested the word *sonder*. In his *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, blogger John Koenig defined the word *sonder* as "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own." Hamm says it was an obvious choice. "It just fit so perfectly with our mission, so we went with it."

That focus on stories, Hamm believes, will be the key for The Sonder Project going forward. "In ten years, I'd love to think that we'd provided access to clean water to a lot of people, and we'd fed millions of people with our food-collection program. But most importantly, I would just like to know that people are more aware than they were ten years ago about what's going on in the world."

*The Sonder Project is headquartered in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. For more information, please visit the website at [www.thesonderproject.org](http://www.thesonderproject.org).*