

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Leadership Supplement
Hollaback Cofounder Emily May
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PROFILE: Hollaback Cofounder EMILY MAY

BY JEANINE BECKER

Emily May moved to New York City after college with the intent of working for social change. Initially, she focused on anti-poverty work. But it was her experience of street harassment that became the catalyst for her cofounding what is now a global nonprofit—Hollaback—which May now leads as executive director. She was with a circle of friends in 2005, all living in New York. And one after another, they shared stories of being harassed on the street. May shared her own story. One of the men in the group then said, “You live in a different city than we do.”

As May explains, the man’s comment opened her eyes. “He helped me understand movements to address domestic violence and workplace harassment,” she says. And she realized, “If it is not okay in the home and not okay in the workplace, why is it okay on the streets?”

May resolved to change that—to bring a voice to those being harassed and to shift the perspective on street harassment. With a group of friends, she launched Hollaback, providing an online platform for women to share their stories of harassment as well as offline organizing for individual and system change.

Then, in 2012, May was in a moment of personal crisis in attempting to sustain Hollaback, and she attended the American Express Leadership Academy. Hearing the personal stories of key mentors’ own struggles, combined with the community’s support, empowered her to persevere to reach her vision. Now, 12 years later, what started as a small project is a global nonprofit sharing more than 5,000 stories in more than 14 languages.

May and Hollaback have created this large-scale impact—individually for the women who contribute their stories, collectively on the perception of street harassment, and systemically on the institutions that address harassment—by adhering to three key cultural values:

Focus on both individual empowerment and systemic change | The Hollaback platform enables individuals to post stories of their



harassment and photos of the harasser—giving an immediate experience of agency, shifting the power dynamics of street harassment, and serving as a catalyst for behavior and system change. According to Hollaback’s research, May notes, “When people tell their story, it creates a framework shift—people go into telling their story on Hollaback thinking ‘This is something terrible that happened to me’ but come out thinking ‘Wow! This is about the messed-up world we are living in.’ And as a result, [those telling their stories] are more likely to take action.”

Hollaback is looking to change the narrative and sees storytelling as a powerful lever—particularly when paired with movement building. In this political moment, where there has been a 20 percent rise in harassment globally and a 50 percent rise in the United States since the 2016 election, there also has been a significant increase in awareness and desire to mobilize. With Site Leaders, Hollaback has a pipeline approach for engagement beyond storytelling. Its Site Leader program has trained leaders in more than 50 cities in more than 30 countries to ignite this movement—to inspire others to share their stories, to be potent allies as bystander advocates, and to create system change as community organizers.

See the complexity of identities and build a movement across differences | In the Site Leader program, new leaders are expected to lead one campaign and partner with another organization on a second. This required collaboration is purposeful, as it reflects Hollaback’s values. May explains the requirement by quoting the late activist-poet Audre Lorde: “There is no such thing as a single issue movement because there is no such thing as a single issue person.”

By leading one campaign and partnering on another, Hollaback leaders bridge into other movements, such as Black Lives Matter, as well as issues of deportation, ICE raids, and bullying. As May explains, all of these movements are “values aligned with our work, and we can’t ask others to show up for us if we are unable to show up for others. I want our movement to be strengthened by a complex understanding of how our different identities play a role but understand ultimately we are all aligned.”

Collaborate for systemic change | Site Leaders often partner with other nonprofits and activists, but as they gain momentum in their communities, they also start partnering regularly with systems, such as school districts. May is intent on effecting systemic change with partners outside of the nonprofit sector, spearheading partnerships such as online harassment training for BuzzFeed staff, ongoing training to New York Police Department recruits, and a training program for Lyft drivers to assist them in being effective bystander advocates.

May’s furthest-reaching collaboration is just emerging; in 2013, Hollaback started a pilot project, HeartMob, whose mission is to provide a hub for the reporting of online harassment. The initiative’s goal is to enable each victim to report once, enabling HeartMob to compile an aggregate picture of online harassment by a perpetrator on many different social media platforms. HeartMob launched the pilot in January 2016, and women can post their stories now, but to date, social media companies have not agreed to share the data needed to allow for robust coordination and collective action.

Undaunted, HeartMob is now partnering with a large product review and rating organization to achieve its goals. May is hopeful that together—with HeartMob providing the key metrics for effective policing of online harassment (such as how long a company takes to reply to a report of harassment) and the powerful rating platform to compel action—they can catalyze a system change in the way that social media companies address online harassment. ✎