MY CORNELL STORY
Michelle R. Adelman ’89

My normal status on Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype and other social media is “I cannot make this stuff up.” When I was a fresh-faced Cornell agricultural, environmental and biological engineering (ABEN) graduate on my way to New York City, I never would have imagined the foundation I built at Cornell would lead me to southern Africa, where I would use my engineering and business skills to tackle food security and energy access issues in Botswana and the region.

I was quite committed at graduation to becoming a leader in corporate America. With the good fortune of landing a job at the global consulting giant Accenture, I was off to a fast start. Armed with some subway tokens, a couple pairs of high heels, two tailored skirt suits (and two more I was able to borrow from my roommate on a rotational basis), I dove into corporate America.

Accenture proved to be a great place to tune the analytical skills I learned as an engineering student together with the negotiating skills I learned in my favorite ILR collective bargaining class and to apply them to real-life business problems. I learned over the years that most problems, whether they be technical or business, are relatively easy to solve with a little technology and analytical thinking. It is the implementation—a.k.a. the people—that is the real challenge.

After 22 years on the corporate ladder, I decided to take a run at being an entrepreneur and was recruited by a private equity firm. On a whim, I went on a safari vacation to southern Africa before I started my new job. It was a truly different world from the one I came from, and I was captivated. I became fascinated with how business was conducted. It seemed that most of it involved “trade” (buying and selling stuff, not the Wall Street type) and digging natural resources out of the ground. Few fundamental business problems were being tackled—like how to grow food consistently or how to get a dairy cow to produce more than 1.3 gallons of milk a day. I observed how people could survive on less than $4 per day—and actually be happy about it! I also witnessed the impact the HIV/AIDS crisis had on hundreds of thousands of children left orphaned in its wake.

I began a foundation called The Constellation Education Fund to focus on orphaned children and early childhood education. But as we raised money and began to design programs, we came across a bigger obstacle: without real economic development and resulting employment, especially for “youths” (under 30) who make up the largest portion of the population of southern Africa, our efforts to support children would ultimately end in failure.

So I decided to use my years of corporate and entrepreneurial experience and return to my Cornell ABEN foundation to tackle the root problem, by creating businesses that would transform traditional trading supply chains and develop community-based employment. I founded an investment firm, Accite, sold my apartment on Park Avenue, and moved to Botswana. I know, I cannot make this stuff up!

We started investing in businesses that solve basic problems for consumers such as access to food, housing and energy. These businesses use technology to fundamentally transform industries and create much-needed jobs for unskilled youths and women.

Our work has resulted in several satisfying successes over the past two years. In a country where up to 80 percent of food is imported, we’ve built 14,800 square feet of controlled-environment greenhouses that produce 700,000 pounds of fresh vegetables annually, using 2 percent of the water of traditional irrigation farming. We also grow barley sprout animal fodder hydroponically, predictably, 365 days a year, at 80 percent less cost than buying feed, using 1 percent of the water and 1,000 times less land that growing alfalfa in an irrigated field. We have created 100 new entry-level jobs and now almost exclusively employ single mothers in our greenhouses.

Economic and environmental sustainability are also at the core of our current projects. We have a license to build 5MW of solar energy in Namibia, and we are introducing fiber-cement insulated panel housing that enables us to build environmentally efficient, durable homes in four weeks, at 30 percent of the cost.

My work with The Constellation Education Fund has also continued, and the foundation now works hand-in-hand with the Accite businesses, promoting early childhood education through pre-school scholarships, for instance, and providing renewable energy solutions such as solar lanterns for employees without electricity at home.

As a biological and environmental engineering student, I never wanted to be a farmer. Nevertheless, I hung up my high heels and now I drive a pickup truck. Cornell gave me the credentials, the skills and the confidence to tackle some of the biggest agricultural and consumer problems in southern Africa. I cannot make this stuff up.

Michelle Adelman ’89 is the founder of project development and private-equity investment firm Accite. She previously worked as a managing director for the global consulting firm Accenture and as chief executive officer of U.S.-based home health services company Accelion. She is also chair of The Constellation Education Fund and serves on the board of directors of property management company Turnstar Holdings Botswana, Africa Energy Corporation Namibia, and Bana Ba Letsatsi Trust Botswana.