

# The SB Questionnaire: Janet Reineck

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By Roger Durling

"I don't understand living for yourself when the rest of the world is suffering," Janet Reineck – dancer, anthropologist and aid worker - tells me passionately. "When you have water to drink, food to eat and shelter you're doing better than 83% of the people in the planet." She is the founder and Executive Director of World Dance for Humanity – the local non-profit, which through dance classes raises funds that help people in need by supporting small, sustainable, grassroots projects locally and in the developing world – particularly in Rwanda.

Her life has been exciting. "I had the most extraordinary experiences," she tells me. After earning a Bachelors degree in Ethnic Arts, a Master's degree in Dance Ethnology from UCLA, and a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, Janet went to live in Kosovo (former Yugoslavia) in 1981 as an anthropologist. People told her not to go for she was a woman and she'd be eaten alive. "I traveled in the Balkans and encountered Albanians - and I was drawn to them," she recalls. She lived in a Muslim society where women couldn't be alone – and in a country that was also under Martial Law. "I was in love with the place," she says. "It's inexplicable."

In the 1990s, Oxfam asked her to return to Kosovo as the director of rural development projects. She was assigned to the county of Viti – where the population was comprised of a mix of Serbians and Albanians. "I'm trying to build a septic tank and nobody would speak to one another," she recalls of the dynamic. It was a brave and courageous thing she did, as the country was then in the middle of a Serbian crackdown. "We were able to build a well - to build schools," she shares. "We got girls to go to school, and we were able to do all that despite the fact that it was illegal."

She used dance as the bridge between cultures. She explains: "Dance is the medium of expression in social situations. It's an amazing way to bond with people."

In 1997 she came to Santa Barbara because her parents are here. She went to Direct Relief International and despite the fact that she'd done it before she learned fundraising. One day while running on Anapamu Street, she came up with the idea for World Dance for Humanity. Between 2010 and 2013 they supported grassroots projects in Nepal, Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, Uganda, and gave grants to Santa Barbara charities. "We were the first people to donate to neighborhood clinics," she proudly states. In 2013 they started to help a group called Goats for Life - a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit that had been helping Rwandans stay alive in the aftermath of genocide through gifts of goats and cows. Eventually its leader, Betsy Kain, wanted to retire. She asked World Dance to take over her work, and that's when they became a non-profit. Janet tells me that she inherited from Betsy her program director, Justin Bisengimana. "He and I are on the same page on world development," she says. "It's all about people owning their own transformation rather than imposing change from the outside. It's about giving people the tools and training to rebuild their lives." Since then, WD4H has become deeply involved with the communities. They are currently working with 8,400 people in 25 rural communities, providing donations of livestock (goats, cows, and chickens), student stipends, training (in agriculture, leadership, and business) and support to help each community create a sustainable business enterprise

WD4H does 5 classes a week, and every penny goes to charity. The classes are held at the Santa Barbara Dance Center and through Adult Ed (Center for Lifelong Learning) at the Schott Center. The Saturday before Halloween they participate in THRILL THE WORLD - performing THRILLER – which also raises money for Rwanda. This summer WD4H is participating in the Summer Solstice parade with "Break the Chain" - a dance which is a protest against violence towards women - choreographed by Debbie Allen.

As we part, this indomitable aid worker tells me, "I have a really weird take on life - unusual for Santa Barbara. I live in a state of shock and awe about living in paradise, but I feel determined living in this perch to ease suffering

wherever it is.”

She answers the Proust questionnaire.

**What is your greatest fear?**

That the West will never figure out that we can't rid the world of terrorism by killing the terrorists or their supporters, and that as long as there are vast inequities in the world, it will be impossible to achieve a lasting peace.

**What is your idea of perfect happiness?**

The truth is, I'm happy 99% of the time. I am amazed to be alive, and totally thrilled with the "little things." The sun on my face, a ripe mango, a good cup of tea, any time spent with my son Jeremy, honeysuckle on the vine, bird song at dawn, walking on the beach with a friend, nightfall, and above all, "West Wing" reruns (it soothes my soul to go to sleep each night thinking Martin Sheen is our President).

**What do you like most about your job?**

Dancing for Humanity – that says it all!

**Who do you most admire?**

Peter Haslund, a trusted friend and advisor - a selfless, humble, and wise man - devoted to his community. As a Political Science professor, Peter has inspired countless students to achieve great things in their lives. As a director on many non-profit boards, he has helped shape Santa Barbara, working through challenging situations with abundant humanity and humor.

And Justin Bisengimana, our Program Director in Rwanda. A passionate social activist from his early age, Justin was inspired by his mother to devote his life to helping vulnerable people. He is a gifted leader, able to guide genocide survivors out of hatred and hopelessness, into reconciliation, giving them the tools to rebuild their lives.

**What is your greatest extravagance?**

Rainbow Foot Spa, for obvious reasons.

**What is your current state of mind?**

Happy, excited, excessively grateful! Working for 8 years in Kosovo and 4 years in Rwanda has given me a sense of how much of the world lives in hardship and hopelessness. I wake up every day astounded that I have a bed to sleep in, a roof over my head, running water, and food in the fridge. I live every day as if it could be my last, and I have one goal: to get something done for humanity.

**What is the quality you most like in people?**

Openness, interest in the world, spontaneity, passion.

**What is the quality you most dislike in people?**

A sense of entitlement.

**What do you most value in friends?**

Intimacy and openness.

**What is your most marked characteristic?**

I never really grew up. I'm like a kid in my excitement about simple things. I'm an unrelenting optimist.

**Which words or phrases do you most overuse?**

"This is the best..." movie, song, meal, day, sunset, cup of tea, etc. When I say it, I really mean it!

**Which talent would you most like to have?**

Singing and playing music like my son does. I would immediately join up with an Irish, Blue Grass, or Rock n' Roll band, and be part of a madrigal group on the side!

**If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?**

Would be nice to loosen up on my addictions: work and chocolate.

**What do you consider your greatest achievement?**

Creating a community of women in Santa Barbara that is diverse, supportive, and non-judgmental - able to see beyond their own lives and work together toward a greater good. And helping 8,400 Rwandans lift themselves out of poverty.

**Where would you most like to live?**

I'm a small town girl at heart. No need for the diversions that cities offer. Anywhere I can feel nature, weather, community, and purpose – a place where I can help make things happen.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

Memories of the people I have loved who are no longer here.

**What / Who makes you laugh the most?**

Robin Williams and Jon Stewart.

**What is your motto?**

"Do good work, and disappear."

**Which historical figure do you most identify with?**

Gertrude Bell, Edith Durham, Karen Blixen - early 20th century writers and explorers who were drawn to remote regions of the Middle East, Albania, and East Africa like moths to the flame – as Kosovo drew me.

**On what occasion do you lie?**

When I say how many chocolate cookie dough balls I've consumed in one sitting. I often say one, but sometimes it's two.