If you do a Google search on Jacquelline Fuller you will find her mapping epidemics, number-crunching different methods of protecting wildlife, and plotting “moon shots” for disadvantaged high-achieving students. She is the director of Google.org, the charitable giving arm of the tech supergiant. Since its beginning in 2004, Google.org has received 1 percent of its parent company’s net profit, and currently donates about $100 million in grants, 200,000 employee service hours, and $1 billion in products annually, both locally in northern California and around the world. She’s also on the board of GiveDirectly, and formerly served on the boards of the Eastern Congo Initiative, World Vision USA, International Justice Mission, and the California Emerging Technology Fund.

Prior to Google.org, Fuller worked at a startup—it really was at that point—called the Gates Foundation. She launched its public-health initiative in India. Before entering the world of philanthropy, she worked on public policy at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and attended the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

Philanthropy spoke with Fuller about the promise and perils of corporate philanthropy, Silicon Valley’s climate for giving, and what has driven her idealistic career.

Philanthropy: Google’s corporate philanthropy appears to be pretty wide-ranging. How do you describe Google’s giving priorities? What does and doesn’t interest your team?

Fuller: Google.org is fully a part of Google. We’re employees of the company and get our funding directly from it. So we think about how we can invest resources where Google brings something unique to the table. That means we lean toward innovation and technology. Topics like education and learning, opportunity, economic impact, and ensuring people are able to participate in society are themes that cut across what we do.

Philanthropy: Can you give an example of what this philosophy looks like in practice? What does a quintessential Google grant look like?

Fuller: Let’s take the Zika virus. We have a Google office in Brazil, and we knew that we wanted to provide funding to help fight Zika. In conversations with that office it became clear that what would be really helpful is if we could help with predictive modeling and data analytics. Through our relationship with UNICEF, we sent some engineers, product designers, and user interface experts to work with the UNICEF Innovation lab to help build a platform linking data on things like travel and incidence of Zika to think about where the virus might be headed.
Philanthropy: Was giving a priority from the beginning of the company, or has that emerged over time? Did it take the company a while to find its philanthropic niche?
Fuller: In their first letter from the founders before our IPO, Larry Page and Sergey Brin made a commitment to philanthropy. They said that Google is not a conventional company, and part of that is devoting 1 percent of net profit each year to Google.org and philanthropy. So this philanthropy has been in our DNA from the beginning.

Philanthropy: Why did you decide to join the Google team?
Fuller: During the eight years I worked at the Gates Foundation I had seen what could be done when two individuals put their hearts and minds and wallet behind making a humanitarian impact. Not only the good that they did directly, but how they raised the bar for all private philanthropy to be taken more seriously, and for achieving high returns on investment in humanitarian projects. I thought to myself, Bill and Melinda Gates have done that for private philanthropy, but I haven’t really seen that in corporate philanthropy. Of the $373 billion in annual giving in the U.S., only 5 percent comes from companies.

I heard that Google.org was starting up, that Google was serious about the level of resources it would put in, and that it would be very experimental and open to new ways of doing things. So I thought, “I want to go down and see what they’re doing.”

Philanthropy: Some people consider corporate philanthropy mostly public relations. What do you think distinguishes smart corporate giving from other efforts that are less effective and more puffy?
Fuller: There are some slippery “corporate social responsibility” programs, and sometimes when people think about corporate philanthropy that’s what they think about. But there’s actually huge potential if you bring the best of who you are as a company to the table. Doing that can reap huge rewards both in terms of the charitable impact and the health of the company. We’ve seen at Google, for example, that philanthropy is important to the folks that we want to hire. It’s pretty clear that believing in the work that Google.org is doing and having the opportunity to get personally involved is a key factor in people staying at Google.

Philanthropy: What’s your take on the philanthropic climate in Silicon Valley right now? Do you see a lot of other companies giving effectively? Are there any specific causes that you see gaining popularity?
Fuller: There are several leaders stepping forward. There are also several companies coming forward. Some other tech companies work with us on getting more women and underrepresented minorities interested in computer-science careers. That’s important to Google because we believe that having computational skills is the new literacy standard for many twenty-first century jobs. That’s something we want in high schools nationally, including opportunities for those who want to develop skills as programmers or data analysts.

Philanthropy: Do you think the philanthropic approach in Silicon Valley is different because many of the business founders are young and starting philanthropy young?
Fuller: Maybe in older generations there was more of an attitude of “I’m going to work really hard and build my business and then I’m going retire and think about charity.” Some of today’s young founders are saying, “Actually, I want to do both at the same time.” Some are even saying, “Actually, I want to contribute through the social enterprise that I’m starting.”

Philanthropy: How have you seen givers use different financial instruments, like limited-liability companies, program-related investments, pay-for-success bonds? Have you seen those grow in popularity in charitable work?
Fuller: There’s some slow growth there. We have done some investing using pay-for-performance, specifically in our homelessness portfolio. There are Bay-area philanthropists setting up LLCs so they have the freedom to say, “I just want to put my money to work to achieve these outcomes, whether I’m funding a nonprofit or a social enterprise.”

Philanthropy: I read that you’re the child of a diplomat, and I’m curious how your background and childhood affects your work today.
Fuller: We lived in Germany when I was young, and we spent time in the Soviet Union before the wall came down, so I grew up in a family that was globally minded, and they passed that on to me, along with a love of travel and exposure to lots of different cultures and ways of thinking.

Philanthropy: So why didn’t you end up in diplomacy?
Fuller: I thought I was going to. In fact I was majoring in arms control as an undergrad. But my heart got in the way. I was living in Los Angeles, and I was volunteering in the neighborhood with a community group, and I saw the issues of urban poverty. I thought, “there are a lot of powerful people trying to figure out issues like nuclear disarmament, and I’m more confident that will get solved.” But in impoverished communities I didn’t see a swell of people or money or thought or creativity or technology aimed at solving problems. So I decided that might be a better use of my life.

Philanthropy: You also worked for Kay Coles James. How did that connection happen? What was it like working for her?
Fuller: It was actually my first job out
of college. I graduated from UCLA on a Friday, and I started at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services the following Monday. Kay Coles James was the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at the time in the first Bush administration, and she had been appointed to the National Commission on Children. I’d applied for a job at HHS and someone thought, “oh, this person could help Kay on the National Commission on Children.” So I got hired.

Philanthropy: Then you worked with Louis Sullivan?
 Fuller: Right. Dr. Sullivan was the Secretary of Health and Human Services when I joined HHS as the most junior person that you can possibly be. But I really cared about urban poverty, and I kept sending stuff up the food chain. I was 1,800 levels down, but I would write memos and somehow they got to the Secretary. At one point he said to someone on his team, “Who is writing this stuff? Who is this? Bring her in, I want her to do some research and writing for me.” And so I became a speechwriter to the Secretary after my first year there.

Philanthropy: What were you writing about that caught his attention?
 Fuller: Well, for example there were these public-health documents called MMRs—Morbidity and Mortality Reports. From one of them, I compared the number of kids who die in youth homicides on our streets to the death rate in the Gulf War. We were losing more children in an average 100 days in American cities than the fatalities of that entire war. But where were the yellow ribbons?

Philanthropy: It appears that you’re a person of faith—how does that affect what you do?
 Fuller: I’m definitely a believer. I wasn’t exposed to a lot of religion in my youth, and became a Christian a little later in life—late high school, early college. I remember reading the Bible when I first became a Christian, from Genesis all the way through, and I came away thinking, “one, there is a lot I don’t understand in this book, and two, God loves the poor and we have a responsibility to ensure that we’re never the oppressor, and that we’re taking care of strangers and widows and orphans and the fatherless.” It made me think that this is something I should do as a Christian. That really started the journey.

Philanthropy: We hear stereotypes that being a person of faith in Silicon Valley is rough. Have you encountered anything strange about living and working there as a Christian?
 Fuller: Something I love about Silicon Valley is that people are really interested in understanding the science and the data behind any phenomenon. I find that people are open to talking about all sorts of things and open to different viewpoints, but they do want to ensure that you are coming from an intellectually thoughtful approach, that you’ve considered obvious challenges or questions, and don’t just say “the Bible says it, I believe it, that’s final.” There are some big hearts here, and many people care about making the world better, and are open to conversations about spirituality regardless of what tradition you come from. People are curious and like hearing from different spiritual and faith perspectives. But they are going to expect you to come with that same respect and curiosity toward them.

Philanthropy: Between the Gates Foundation and then Google, you seem to have a knack for picking a startup that goes big—what’s your secret?
 Fuller: Oh, I had no idea the Gates Foundation was going to succeed. I had read a piece on Bill Gates somewhere in a magazine, before the foundation had really started, and he was asked about his fortune and he said, “I’m going to give the vast majority away. I’m going to give it to help the poorest of the poor.” And I said, “Hire me! I’ll help you.”

So thank you for giving me credit for having foresight, but it was more of a response of “yes, that’s a mission I can get behind.”

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