

Gary Ford Featured in *Bostonia* for his MicroCredit Work

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Boston University's Alumni magazine, *Bostonia*, featured six Boston University alumni who have chosen work that brings them into contact with the neediest people in our global society. Gary Ford was profiled for his work with MicroCredit Enterprises. Please see the excerpt below; to read the full article, [click here](#).

"Ending extreme poverty sounds like a slogan, a noble goal too big to achieve. But take that goal and individualize it, as Gary Ford has done, and it becomes a surprisingly small-scale proposition. It happens when a woman in Guatemala sets up a tortilla stand. When an Indonesian mother of five begins to sell crafts on the street in front of her hut, and her husband starts a pedicab business. Or when a woman in Nicaragua buys the supplies she needs to make and sell herbal remedies.

Each of these people was lifted out of hunger and deprivation by loans worth less than the cost of a dinner date, loans made by the nonprofit MicroCredit Enterprises (MCE), where Ford (LAW'77) is pro bono general counsel. By establishing an innovative guarantor-based lending model and working through carefully vetted local organizations to find individuals, often women, with little chance of obtaining credit elsewhere, MCE is successfully reaching some of the poorest families in the world.

"The stark fact is that there are two worlds today," Ford says. "Half of the world lives on \$2 or less per day; 15 percent of the world lives on \$1 or less a day. In round numbers, that's about a billion people who are always hungry. That's a reality that I think we who live in the other world find difficult to comprehend."

Ford is a partner in the Washington, D.C.-based Groom Law Group, the largest employee benefits practice in the country. He became interested in workers' benefits in Professor of Law Tamar Frankel's classroom at BU, when ERISA, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act, had just taken effect. He did a stint as ERISA counsel to the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources before joining Groom in 1981 and later took a hiatus to work as the head lawyer for the federal Pension Benefit Guaranty

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Work Continued*

Corporation, arguing a case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. "And when my savings were depleted, I went back to private practice," he says with a laugh.

Ford had spent most of the year before law school traveling in Africa, and the images he carried in his memory fueled a long-standing interest in international poverty. MCE, founded in 2005 and almost entirely volunteer-driven, intersected with those interests "at a point in my career where I was able to look up a little bit," he says.

As general counsel, he works closely with guarantors, individuals and foundations that pledge at least \$1 million each as collateral to secure credit from banks and other lending institutions. There are forty guarantors today, up from about a half dozen in 2006. For each \$1 million in backing they provide, MCE can generate up to 5,000 loans to farmers, crafts-people, weavers, and other entrepreneurs in countries around the world, from Armenia to Bolivia to Tajikistan.

The organization has made about \$12.5 million in loans thus far, to nineteen microfinance institutions in thirteen countries. Those institutions in turn have made loans to about 230,000 poor people. Many of the loans are less than \$100; some are \$25. No microfinance institution has yet defaulted on an MCE loan, a fact that Ford is proud of, but not surprised by, since MCE does vigorous due diligence, and since poor women entrepreneurs, who make up the bulk of MCE's end borrowers, repay their loans 97 percent of the time.

For Ford, the work has satisfied a need he'd been aware of for most of his adult life. "I didn't set out to just make money," he says. "I've had a very rewarding career in private practice, but in a sense, this is something that has been there all along. I've wanted to do something to help. So this has been fulfilling personally — but the caveat is that it's not about me; it's about people who are putting their children to sleep tonight hungry."

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