

Board Profile

Derek Long

*Ginger Oppenheimer,
Membership/Marketing Manager*

Derek Long grew up in Ohio, attended the University of Toledo, and didn't leave the state until several years after graduating. He met his wife Michelle in a doctor's office when they were both pharmaceutical reps. Both of them had business and marketing degrees and both were looking for a way to have some autonomy and freedom. Having been Ohio-bound all his life, he and Michelle had a curiosity about the rest of the world. Within a year and a half they were married and for the next two years, traveled the world. Part of their goal in the U.S. portion of their travels was to find a new home. "We were looking for a diverse, large city, close to mountains and water," Derek says. They landed in Seattle.

Derek worked for a company that recycled medical equipment and then as a program manager for the Federal Reserve Bank. In the meantime, Michelle was getting an MBA at the University of Washington. The business department has a business plan competition every year and Derek, Michelle, and two of her classmates wanted to form a company that sold socially responsible products, particularly handmade goods. They won the competition, received venture capital, and began with an online presence, sourcing products from all over the world.

Derek also worked with a number of larger clients helping them source products that were sustainably produced. This led to work with Conservation International, which had purchased a tract of the jungle in Mexico for preservation. "It was an eye opener for everyone," Derek explains. Suddenly the native people were shut out from an area that had previously allowed them to make a living. "Environmental organizations need to think about people and economics, too. They need to find solutions so those things—protecting the environment, people's need to make a living, and the economics of a region—don't compete." Conservation International realized the need and gave technical assistance to the people in the region on how to raise the best organic



Photo courtesy of Derek Long

Derek Long with wife Michelle

shade-grown coffee they could; they were also given access to capital at low rates, creating a success story for everyone.

In 2001, they decided to fold their business and Derek began helping their former competitors source socially responsible products.

Derek and Michelle moved to Whatcom County, wanting to be closer still to the mountains. They also wanted to work more deeply on issues of a sustainable economy at the local level. "It helps to have access to the decision makers, the owners, to do that," Derek says. They did a lot of research on ownership issues—their target market was working with business owners who are community based. "We talked with dozens of business owners in Whatcom County and asked 'What services aren't being met? What projects are needed?'"

Derek, Michelle, and Rick Dubrow, a local builder who espoused green buildings, put their heads together and formed Sustainable Connections—a business network establishing and supporting a local living economy that sustains itself, our community and a healthy environment. Their mission is to empower local business and consumer behavior that promotes a vibrant community and a healthy environment.

Derek and Michelle both served on the Co-op Member Affairs Committee until Derek decided to run for the board in 2002. When considering whether to run, he thought "We can provide a service to the Co-op and this is a good place to contribute." And indeed, Derek's expertise in business and marketing and in promoting a local, living economy has added tremendously to this Board. "The Co-op is the strongest model business in our community," he believes. "I'm learning all my best stuff from the Co-op."

For more information on Sustainable Connections, see their website at www.sconnect.org/NWWashington.