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ONLINE Exclusive: Spotlight on BALLE National organization for local living economies headquartered in Bellingham

By: Hilary Parker

Eight years ago Michelle and Derek Long were launching their fledgling "locals first" organization, Sustainable Connections. At the same time a similar idea was being born inside the Social Venture Network – a high-profile group of socially conscious business owners, including Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry's and Anita Roddick of the Body Shop. Their goal, to build an international network of local economies driven by independent, locally owned businesses committed to enhancing community life and healthy ecosystems, became the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE).



Michelle Long

BALLE tapped the Longs as national coordinators, a position they held concurrently with their jobs at Sustainable Connections (SC) for two years before switching their focus solely to SC. Then, last September Michelle rejoined BALLE as its executive director, while Derek took over the executive director duties at SC. The BALLE offices relocated to Bellingham, taking up residence next to SC in the new Creekside Building, a mix-used building using green design elements.

BALLE is essentially a network of organizations similar to SC throughout the United States and Canada, currently with 80 member organizations and an estimated 22,000 independent business members. Core programs include green building, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, zero-waste manufacturing, independent retail and community capital.

"Sustainable Connections is about going deep. BALLE is about going wide," Long explains. Currently, Long is working toward better connecting BALLE's member communities so that they are learning from each other and creating synergy around best practices and programs. Sustainable Connections has been a leader among BALLE members from the beginning, says Long, but a number of other member organizations are coming into their own.

"It's not just working here in Whatcom County and Northwest Washington," Long said. She points to the Grand Rapids, Mich., Local First organization. With their focus on locally owned business the city has been able to stave off the worst of the economic slump suffered by the rest of the state.

BALLE's work is beginning to get national recognition. The White House has expressed interest in the organization providing a briefing on local living economies, and this month the PBS program NOW with David Broncoccio will be taping a segment in Bellingham on local businesses owners working to build sustainable communities and economies. The show, which will feature a number of local businesses, will air in November.

The spotlight will be on Bellingham next year when the organization's national conference takes place June 14-17 on Western Washington University's campus.

Long is an energetic believer in the power of community and the ability of individuals to transform our economy into a new model that brings the decision making power back to the local level. "You can't take on a global problem, but you can take on a local problem with your peers. ... People should feel proud of what was started here."