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THE INTERVIEW

Wikipedians do it for love. Really.

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Before meeting Sue Gardner, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, I look her up on, well, Wikipedia.

The bare-bones entry in the global open-source encyclopedia tells me she is 43 (although, funnily enough, her birth date says "citation needed"). She was born and raised in Canada and is a Ryerson journalism graduate who worked for the CBC, starting as an intern for As it Happens and eventually helming CBC.ca.

What it doesn't tell me is that she has a tattoo of a black-widow spider on her hand. Also that she is the child of an Anglican minister and a school principal. When we meet at Wikimedia's open-concept headquarters in San Francisco's SoMa district, it is these facts that seem more telling.

The head of the fifth-most-visited website in the world comes across as both old-fashioned and radical, a mega-voltage do-gooder, rebellious in her idealism and provocative in her optimism.

"I grew up in a public service family, we wanted to make the world a better place, and we were a good Canadian earnest family," says Ms. Gardner, who has a club-kid's crop of black hair and busy, mischievous eyes.

"I wanted to make good quality information available to people so they could make good decisions about their lives. At the time, the way to do that was through traditional journalistic methods."

Today, she argues, it's through Wikipedia.

She has just returned from a business trip to New York, Madrid and Gdansk (for the site's annual Wikimania conference), with a side trip to Copenhagen to convalesce. But, as she takes me on a tour of the office - all exposed brick and ducting and i-chic staffers in plastic-rimmed glasses - she seems about as weary as a spark plug.

In the boardroom, where we sit, broad windows face the Pacific Bell building, a neo-gothic skyscraper reaching for the city's fog-skimmed summer skies. Over a can of Fresca, Ms. Gardner explains that she wanted to work for the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit that governs Wikipedia, for the same reasons she had always dreamt, as a child, of working for the CBC.

Wikipedia, according to Ms. Gardner, is altruistic, its mission (one of "radical openness, radical freedom and radical convergence") being to serve up objective information, aggregated and synthesized by volunteers in a non-commercial, credentials-neutral environment: You're as likely to read a text written by a high-school student as one by a PhD.

To her, the concept is as traditional as it is futuristic, a consoling throwback to old-school journalistic principles of objectivity and community. She recalls meeting John Carroll, former editor of the Los Angeles Times, who was bemoaning the crumbling of journalistic traditions. "I said to him, 'Don't worry, your heirs are writing Wikipedia. Everything is fine!'"

Wikipedia certainly appears to be doing fine. Launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, Wikipedia now gets more visits than any other non-profit website in the world and claims 371 million unique visitors every month. It has chapters in 30 countries around the world, versions in 271 languages (there are Wikipedias in Swahili and Cree), and 100,000 volunteers (also dubbed "editors" or "Wikipedians").

"I love that at any time, when I'm asleep in California, there's a Wikipedian somewhere fixing a typo or polishing an article," says Ms. Gardner, who was one of only seven staffers (now there are 50) when she was hired in 2007 after answering an online ad.

"Wikipedia is like the National Parks Service. The Internet is a vast space and it will only continue to grow, but in the vastness you still need space for parks or public libraries." The more Ms. Gardner talks (with growing preacher's fervour) about the Wiki world, it begins to sound less like a mere repository for information, and more like a storybook utopia and ever-expanding playpen for the world's smart geeks, all driven by the singular desire to share and be helpful.

"Wikipedians do it for love, for mission-type reasons" she says. "They don't want to be paid. They want to be praised." The stereotypical Wikipedian "always felt a little bit alone. They're the ones who always carry around knapsacks full of reference books. They were the ones picked last for teams and were the smartest kids in the class. Those are our people!"

But like any society, the Wiki-world has its skirmishes and vandals, its constitution and laws. If one Wikipedian deletes another's article three times, an Edit War is declared. Every year, a group of 10 seasoned Wikipedians is elected to resolve such disputes and restore peace). In the Wiki-verse, there are also births (new Wikipedians are born every day): "The first thing they do is fix a typo. Then, they'll get more adventuresome, and fix text or add facts. When they've blossomed, they'll create new articles, where articles don't exist," says Ms. Gardner.

Wikipedians can also, should they choose, become bureaucrats, administrators or adoptive parents (the Adopt-a-Wiki program allows senior Wikipedians to mentor a younger generation). Underpinning this system is the Wikipedian constitution: "Everybody is volunteer. Everybody is an editor, all are equal and all are valued," she says, "what it proves is that most people are basically good and want to do good things."

But even commercial-free utopias need more than morality to thrive: This one needs \$20-million a year. "Getting that amount of money is not a problem at all," Ms. Gardner says. Like Wikipedia's content, the money comes mostly from small, independent donors. (With exceptions: Last year, Google donated \$2 million.)

Also challenging Wikipedia-as-democratic-paradise is the fact that 87 per cent of Wikipedians are male (the average is a 25-year-old engineering student). Most come from affluent countries that afford them the technology and leisure time to sit computer-side, without pay.

Ms. Gardner's goal is to correct that imbalance: "My vision for Wikipedia is for it to be the sum of all the world's knowledge," she says simply, taking a sip of her Fresca. "To do that, I want more women, more older people, more people from Africa!"

Her goals for the site are as limitless as the site itself. What's also limitless is Ms. Gardner's formidable capacity for impassioned conversation. "We Wikipedians are good talkers! We love to chat. And proselytize," she says, "We just care. A lot!"

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