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Life After Hollywood, Part II: Storytelling to Change the World

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As a television and movie writer and producer, Deborah Jones had the sort of first career in Hollywood that a lot of students in scriptwriting seminars only dream about. She created and produced a TV series, *Amazing Grace*, which starred [Patty Duke](#) and ran for a season on NBC. Her script for the 2004 made-for-cable movie *Life on Liberty Street*, which the New York Times called "a touching tale of forgiveness and compassion," is still posted on screenwriting how-to sites, alongside the work of luminaries such as [Mike Figgis](#), [John Sayles](#) and [M. Night Shyamalan](#). But her second career is actually more impressive because she's found a way to use

her entertainment-industry skills to help change the world.

Jones is now an activist for [Search for Common Ground](#), an international organization that promotes nonviolent conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving in countries plagued by ethnic and political strife. As executive producer for [Common Ground Productions](#), the organization's media division, she still creates episodic video drama of the sort she once wrote and produced for American television. But this project is far larger in scale and has a much greater potential impact. Under Jones' supervision, different versions of *The Team*--a TV series about multi-ethnic soccer players who struggle to work together to win--are being created in a dozen countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. (In three others, it is being produced as a radio drama.)

The basic premise is the same," Jones explains. "You're following four fictional footballers, and they have to overcome their differences--socioeconomic, tribal, whatever. It's a metaphor for the larger conflicts in the countries where we work."

That may sound a little like producer [Dick Wolf](#) and his various versions of the *Law & Order* franchise. But Jones' job is vastly more complicated. From Morocco to Nepal, Jones uses scripts written by local writers familiar with the particular problems in their countries, employs local actors and, wherever possible, hires local production talent as well. "We essentially start over in each country and create a new series," she says. "Each set of writers sees the idea differently, and they want to write about different issues. In the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo), for example, they made it about a women's team, dealing with women's issues in that country. And we have to cast a completely new cast. It's quite challenging."

Jones' new career, which sometimes takes her to refugee camps and impoverished places without running water, offers a lifestyle that's considerably less upscale than the existence she once led in the Hollywood Hills with her former husband, a successful production designer/art director.

But by the mid-2000s, Jones was ready to leave all that behind. Her marriage was ending, and she felt increasingly out of sync with the fantasy factory that is Hollywood. "The industry was changing so much, with reality shows taking over," she recalls. "I just didn't want to do it anymore. I wanted to do something that actually made a difference in the world, and television was moving away from anything that resembled that."

Looking for a change, Jones volunteered with [International PEN](#), the writer's organization that campaigns across the world for human rights and freedom of expression, and spent some time "working to get writers out of jail in other countries," as she puts it. Those labors inspired her to develop a new dream--going back to graduate school and studying international affairs with the aim of becoming an activist in some of the world's trouble spots. Aiming high, she got into the [Fletcher School](#) at Tufts University, a prestigious institution that has produced the likes of former UN ambassador, congressman and current New Mexico Governor [Bill Richardson](#). "It took me out of my comfort level," she says. "I was middle-aged person thrown in with a lot of younger, very smart people. It's very competitive."

But Jones didn't let that stop her. "I thought, 'Now's the time to see what I can do,'" she says.

And interestingly, since she left Hollywood, Jones' productions are garnering some impressive ratings. In Kenya, *The Team* is among the top 10 most popular TV programs, and an astonishing 73 percent of Kenyans in a recent survey said that they either watched it or listened to a radio version. In Morocco, more than half of the country's 12 million TV viewers watch the show.

Jones has another challenge that Dick Wolf doesn't face: Making the show available to an audience of viewers who, in some cases, don't even have televisions. To remedy that, a mobile theater unit visits remote villages and shows the episodes, and then facilitates group discussions afterward--making sure that people on different sides get the chance to be heard, even if they aren't speaking to each other.

"Those events give people a chance to talk about issues without having to confront their neighbors directly," Jones says. "What we've found is that after these discussions, local groups spontaneously start forming to spread the message. They've formed kids' soccer leagues together, and taken the show out to other places, across tribal lines. Everybody loves football in these countries, so you have a built-in franchise that everybody likes."

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