
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

AUGUST 2020

LEADERS IN ACTION

Jessica Hubley
CEO & Co-Founder, AnnieCannons, Inc.



TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CODE

Jessica Hubley and Laura Hackney, co-founders of AnnieCannons, train survivors of human trafficking to become successful software engineers. As CEO Of AnnieCannons, Jessica has a background in law. Prior to co-founding AnnieCannons, Jessica worked for legal firms, her own private practice as well as in software startups.

As a teenager, when her father bought a car, Jessica negotiated a price well below its listed figure, and felt such a rush that she was determined to pursue business negotiations like this for a career. She began by attending Law School at Stanford. Eventually, she would realize that negotiating deals to support survivors' economic empowerment was an even better use of her skills.

Now, as the CEO of AnnieCannons, she and Laura have spent the last six years giving survivors of human trafficking the training and opportunities to build a career in software development.

"We were delighted to find from the very beginning that the opposite [of what skeptics said] is true," said Jessica. "In fact, my most senior engineer looked for minimum wage work for 18 months before she was trafficked, and no one would hire her. Today, she is an incredibly talented front-end engineer that works incredibly hard and adds immense value to our organization. Bias can make people blind to talent."

AnnieCannons operates as both an agency and a non-profit organization funded by charitable donations. The agency programme generates related business revenue that helps cover a growing portion of AnnieCannons' operating costs. AnnieCannons now also runs an incubator for survivor-ideated technologies. Training begins with a six-month bootcamp, and continues with opportunities to learn advanced technologies through workshops, practical work and apprenticeships.

It has been a long road from her days as a hard-working law student. Jessica has always emphasized that she feels an immense privilege to have two loving and supportive parents, as well as the chance to attend an institution like Stanford. The network she built at Stanford was instrumental in setting up a support system for both advisers and fundraising opportunities for AnnieCannons. And, while President of Women of Stanford Law, she was already advocating for the Immigration Clinic to work towards an asylum process for women fleeing female genital mutilation (FGM).

While she loved the intellectually stimulating work of law school, she was surprised to find that legal work was far different from the negotiating she hoped she would do. Jessica quickly discovered that bankers performed the deal negotiations she was most interested in, while lawyers agonized over the paperwork, and that the oral argument of trial practice was the work of only a few very senior lawyers at the firm. "[It] quickly became clear to me that the biggest parts of the practice of law were not my dream job," she said.

Finding ways around the glass ceiling

At the outset of Jessica's legal career, as an associate at a major international law firm, she thought bringing in paying clients, would both impress the partners and cement her prospects. To her surprise, the opposite was true. In fact, during a performance review, Jessica was told she was not a good fit for the firm, even though her work product was good, because she was "too confident."

*"I really had not felt that kind of overt gender discrimination at any point in my educational experience up until that time," she said.
"It was the first kind of reality check, and it helped me realize a less-overt version had been there all along."*

Soon after this, Jessica left this firm for a smaller one working on privacy, intellectual property transactions, and security compliance, still bringing in her own startup clients, but the large firm economics she was used to were designed for intellectual property litigation and were not well suited to support startups.

She decided to go solo, creating a new flexible-retainer law firm business model. Starting with her existing clients, Jessica became a general counsel for small software startups and did specialty consulting on privacy and security compliance for software products. Her firm continued to gain clients and grew about 70 per cent each year.

During her time at the large law firms, Jessica had found time to devote to pro-bono work with asylum immigration cases. In each case, she found that discriminatory, patriarchal systems stood in the way of progress and human rights. With the additional free time she found in her solo law practice, she began focusing more on these issues.

Jessica realized that, despite an aptitude for and interest in science and mathematics, she had never been encouraged into pathways to a career in science, tech, engineering or math (STEM), even with all her privileges. Jessica began to see her work as a lawyer as a way to generate money to create opportunities and encouragement for disadvantaged girls to study math or science. What she did not know was that her connection to a fellow Stanford alumna would change the way she thought about making that happen.

Building a network towards impactful work

Jessica met Laura Hackney through their human rights Professor at Stanford, and began to learn infinitely more about the issues of global trafficking through her involvement with Laura's research team.

Jessica joined a research trip with Laura's research group, through Stanford, to Myanmar in September 2013. During the trip, Jessica interviewed several survivors in a shelter, most of them women from disadvantaged ethnic groups, and planned to contrapose their stories in a book with details of the technologies that could have prevented or alleviated what had happened to them.

She noticed that all the women she encountered had something in common. "They were just out looking for work to support their family. They encountered someone who had developed an incredibly sophisticated scheme to trick them. In other words,... they were industrious. ...[\$15] was enough money to be compelling enough to take the risk of the unknown, of being trafficked... that was a six months' salary advance," Jessica said.

Both Jessica and Laura could see that the women in these shelters were committed to seeking jobs. Unfortunately, the training programmes available in shelters taught no skills more advanced than sewing, cooking, and making jewellery – gender stereotypical skills that could not result in a living wage, especially without business training.

The two co-founders had recently watched the boom of coding bootcamps in San Francisco and thought software programming was a more viable job option for a capable, industrious survivor. It was work that could be done at flexible hours and that required no prior education. Plus, software programmes that worked could provide a kind of incremental affirmation, a "concrete measurement of victory... [which] is a really good thing to give survivors," Jessica said, "it is a [great] experience to align with trauma recovery."

Jessica and Laura spent the whole of 2014 in strategic planning for AnnieCannons.

"We knew that giving [women] the best skills in the world would not be enough because the workplace itself was the problem," Jessica said.

"The workplace was not ready for survivors - not because they had survived trafficking or because they had trauma... But, because the barriers that already kept women of colour and women in general from advancing in the technology industry were amplified by victim-shaming and misconceptions about trafficking. Having to explain an arrest record for prostitution was going to poison anyone's working relationship with a future [supervisor], especially one that already underestimated them."

Jessica knew from her experience representing contractor software developers that, once you proved you could do software programming work well, business was not hard to find. By the end of 2014, Jessica and Laura committed themselves to running a training programme, an agency offering software development, and a place for their graduates to work.

Overcoming the status quo in the tech industry

Jessica and Laura found disbelief and dismissal from many in the tech industry who could not fathom survivors doing software programming, much less a combined training and workspace for survivors of trafficking run by women with no programming background. Jessica recounts that they were often told they should 'do just one thing.' Still, Jessica and Laura knew that learning a marketable skill set without guidance or employment was not enough. They taught themselves to code to prepare to teach others.

As self-taught engineers, Jessica and Laura continued to meet challenges when it came to raising startup funding for Annie Cannons. They found that traditional funding for the anti-trafficking movement was focused on 'rescue,' not setting up a sustainable plan for the survivors to grow and develop as women professionals with career potential. They decided to take the risk and start running the programme on the side of their day jobs to prove that their idea would work.

Now on its sixth full bootcamp cycle, AnnieCannons has trained graduate instructors to teach classes and help train more instructors, so that the firm can ultimately train more survivors. Some graduates work for AnnieCannons and independent contractor software engineers, while others are employed by the organization as staff engineers and product managers. This sustainable model allows multiple avenues for participants in the programme to grow and develop according to the demands of the software market.

At the start, it was essential for Jessica and Laura to ensure programme participants entered a safe and supported space for learning and working. For survivors of trafficking, exploitation, and oppression,

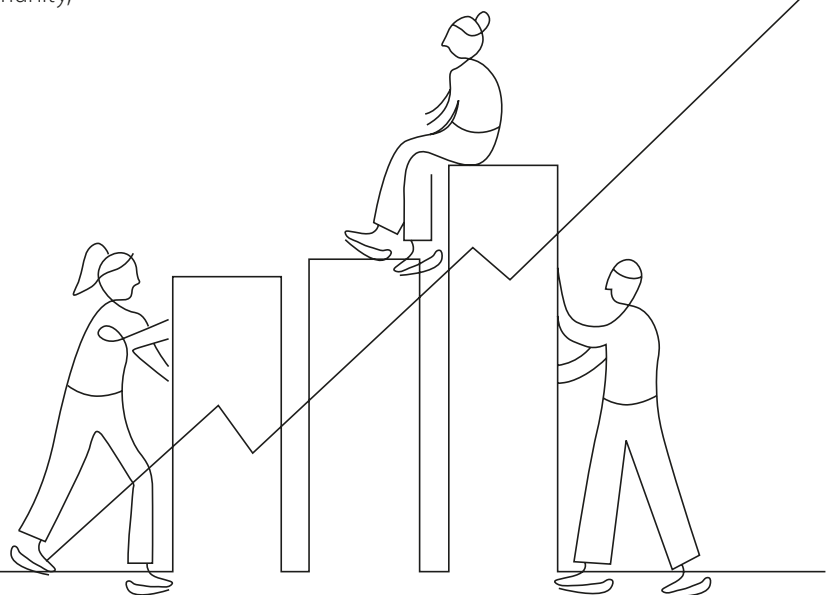
“having someone show faith in survivors is critical for their building the confidence that they need to [become] good engineers. Teaching coding is honestly the easy part,” Jessica said.

The training programme serves mostly women of colour, including both US citizens and immigrants. Annie Cannons covers the cost of training at a local site, food, transportation to and from classes, as well as on-site childcare.

During the first years AnnieCannons operated as a development shop, it built website and mobile applications for other non-profit organizations, small businesses, and impact-minded larger organizations.

Annie Cannons found that survivors in their training programme created new ideas for software technologies that present more compelling opportunities to create a world without abuse. Now, their software development staff work on both internal 'SurviveTech' impact technologies and external client projects.

With the COVID-19 global pandemic, AnnieCannons took their sixth cohort fully virtual. While Jessica was initially concerned about the success rate of students who did not have an in-person community, she shared her delight that the current class,...



...“is on track for a 100 per cent graduation rate and 100 per cent qualification rate for web development work (their previous highest rate was 100 per cent/80 per cent). [This class has] the best attendance scores of any class in the past [...] staying engaged with the material throughout the day like none ever has,” Jessica said.

AnnieCannons signed the Women’s Empowerment Principles in April 2020 to reaffirm their progress and remain on track for gender equality and women’s empowerment. Jessica shared that signing the WEPs is a critical first step in moving toward a world without abuse and exploitation by recognizing the equality for every human being.

Women’s Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate leadership



Workplace HR



Employee well-being and safety



Education and training for women




Supplier diversity & marketing practices




Community engagement



Measurement and reporting

 weps.org

 weps@unwomen.org

 [@WEPrinciples](https://twitter.com/WEPrinciples)

 [@Empower_Women](https://twitter.com/Empower_Women)

Funded by:



European Union

Produced by:



In support of:

**WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT
PRINCIPLES**

Established by UN Women and the
UN Global Compact Office

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the European Union, UN Women, International Labour Organization or the United Nations and their Member States.