
15 Top Game-Changers of 2010

They're urban farmers, health care activists, school builders and volunteer counselors who're working to make the world a better place.

By David Ferrell | December 23, 2010



photo: Courtesy Majora Carter

Majora Carter has quickly become one of America's pre-eminent urban activists.

In the movies, action heroes tend to be young, fast and strong. They save the world in a madcap rush.

In real life, they are more often on the far side of 40, performing their exploits over years -- even decades. They display no particular physical prowess as they move through meeting halls and airports, armed with cell phones, laptops and vast networks of contacts. At a time of endless, seemingly insurmountable crises -- when bureaucracies don't seem to work, when public disgust runs rampant, when dollars are scarce due to the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression -- these selfless humanitarians carry on their quiet quests to save the world, or at least make it better.

They are game-changers. They are changing ideas about what is possible. They are taking on society's

biggest, most intractable problems and, against all odds, making a huge difference.

Here are 15 top game-changers of 2010.



1. Will Allen

At 6-foot-7, Allen was a basketball star and NBA draft choice in 1971, although he never played in the league. He now stands even taller as an urban farmer, mentoring young people and raising organic food to help feed the poor -- work that won him a \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation «Genius Grant» in 2008. This year, he has expanded his role in public nutrition, consulting with leaders in quake-stricken Haiti and joining First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House to launch a campaign against obesity. Since taking over a small, failing nursery in the mid-1990s, Allen has expanded to 15 organic farms and 35 greenhouses in Milwaukee (where he is based), Chicago and Madison, Wis. His nonprofit [Growing Power Inc.](#) raises enough chemical-free vegetables to feed 10,000 people while also selling to restaurants and wholesalers. Profits fund a training program for farmers. The 61-year-old Allen aims to teach 50 million people grow their own food, a goal intended to fundamentally change America's food system.

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2. Nancy G. Brinker

It sounds impossible: being appointed to a top federal post by George W. Bush and also singled out for America's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, by Barack Obama. But Brinker did it, due to her success in launching the international campaign against breast cancer. Brinker's passion for the cause is personal. Her sister, Susan, died of the disease in 1980, and Brinker herself is a breast cancer survivor. The 64-year-old former businesswoman -- who served as U.S. Chief of Protocol under Bush -- used her sister's name in founding [Susan G. Komen for the Cure](#) 28 years ago. The nonprofit has raised \$1.5 billion -- that's billion with a «B» -- to fund research and treatment and raise public awareness. Brinker, the CEO, gave the cause unprecedented exposure this year with pink-ribbon days at pro sporting events and the release of her book, *Promise Me: How a Sister's Love Launched the Global Movement to End Breast Cancer*, a New York Times bestseller.



3. Dr. Judith Broder

Broder, a psychiatrist in Los Angeles, was easing quietly into retirement when she attended a 2004 Hollywood play, «The Sand Storm: Stories From the Front,» produced by U.S. Marine Corps soldier Sean Huze. The emotional impact on Broder caused her to set aside plans for leisure and travel to create [The Soldiers Project](#), a nonprofit network of licensed therapists who give free counseling to American troops and their families. As described earlier at

[SecondAct](#), Broder directs the organization from her home in Studio City, Calif. At age 70, she has braced for the return of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan by expanding the network this year to an unprecedented size. Nearly 600 therapists donate thousands of hours in Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Sacramento and Seattle. Broder has funded the expansion, in part, with a \$100,000 Purpose Prize she won a year ago.



4. Majora Carter

Angry over plans for a new waste-handling station in her South Bronx neighborhood, Carter not only joined the resistance but soon demonstrated the tenacity and charisma to become one of America's pre-eminent urban activists. She fought off the project and helped to draft a new waste-disposal plan for all of New York City. Carter founded the nonprofit [Sustainable South Bronx](#) in 2001 and cleaned up the trash-strewn banks of the Bronx River, securing \$3 million in public money for a park and lining up \$55 million more for an 11-mile greenbelt now under construction. The MacArthur «Genius Grant» recipient has concentrated this year on expanding her own private, Bronx-based consulting firm, the [Majora Carter Group](#), which is aimed at helping other organizations learn her methods to foster jobs training, urban agriculture and better food-delivery networks in other cities, notably Detroit, Los Angeles and Jackson, Miss. Fast Company magazine listed the 44-year-old former art student as one of the 100 most creative people in business.

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5. Barry Childs

Childs, who grew up in Tanzania, fondly remembered its mountainous beauty and was shocked to return, 35 years later, and see how badly the East African nation had been devastated by AIDS. The disease had created a generation of orphans – some 2 million in a nation of 40 million people. Childs, the son of a British agricultural officer, quit his executive job at Abbott Laboratories in 2000 and launched the nonprofit [Africa Bridge](#) in the back bedroom of his home near Portland, Ore. Initially, Childs expected to use his corporate skills to advise Tanzanian leaders, but the father of three, now 66, became more directly involved with the poor. This year, Africa Bridge provided housing, clothing and food for 3,500 children. Working without a salary, Childs created a system of micro-loans to help children pay for school and set up 28 income-producing produce and livestock cooperatives to generate money and supply food. The Purpose Prize winner spent more than a dozen weeks in Africa overseeing the effort, which includes the ongoing construction of classrooms and medical clinics.



6. Dr. Paul Farmer

The Harvard physician's fight to bring adequate medical care to Haiti is chronicled in Tracy Kidder's 1993 book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*. Farmer also won a MacArthur «Genius Grant» for the tenacity of his campaign against tuberculosis, AIDS and other infectious diseases in a region too

poor to afford costly drugs. The 51-year-old Farmer, one of the founders of [Partners In Health](#), became an even greater figure in 2010 after last January's 7.0 earthquake left an estimated 230,000 Haitians dead and 1 million homeless. With vital government services shut down, Partners In Health became a de facto health-care system, treating many of the 300,000 injured and helping to reopen and run the main hospital in Port-au-Prince. Farmer, born in North Adams, Mass., received seed money from a Boston philanthropist to begin his work and is now expanding his efforts to Rwanda, Kazakhstan, Russia, Malawi and Peru.

7. & 8. Bill and Melinda Gates

The Microsoft chairman and his wife – one of the world's wealthiest couples – are using their \$30 billion private trust to combat some of the planet's most profound problems, from extreme poverty and hunger to disease, tainted drinking water and inadequate schools. One of the current goals is to improve corn yields in Africa by 30 percent over the next six years, an achievement that would better nourish 40 million people. Exploiting scientific advancements in medicine, the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) is bringing about a new era in global health, says Tachi Yamada, who heads the foundation's health program. «I toured a pediatric ward that for years had been filled with children dying of malaria,» Yamada says, recalling a recent trip to Tanzania. «But on this visit, I was amazed to see the ward empty.» At 55, Bill Gates has phased out his day-to-day duties at Microsoft to concentrate on the work of the Seattle, Wash.-based foundation, where Melinda Gates serves as chairwoman.

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9. Gary Maxworthy

During a long career in food distribution, Maxworthy watched millions of pounds of fresh produce go to waste before he finally found a way to divert it to low-income families. The former CEO, who ran one of Northern California's largest food brokerages, was moved by his wife's death from cancer to volunteer at the San Francisco Food Bank. Maxworthy saw a disconnect between distributors, who throw out tons of fruit and vegetables that fail to meet supermarket standards, and charity food banks, which often shun produce in favor of canned and packaged items that rarely spoil. Maxworthy solved the problem by organizing a statewide coalition of food banks and making use of plastic bins, refrigerated trucks and volunteers to collect and distribute unsold produce. The 5-year-old [Farm to Family program](#) now feeds nearly 3 million people. Maxworthy, a 73-year-old Purpose Prize winner, turned his attention this year to trying to set up a similar arrangement with the dairy industry.

10. Greg Mortenson

Mortenson, the son of humanitarian missionaries in Tanzania, where he grew up, has become one of philanthropy's most inspiring figures for his work building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. His 2007 book -- *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time* -- became a New York Times bestseller. This year, Mortenson released a new book, *Stones Into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and*

Pakistan, while boosting the total number of schools built to more than 130. His nonprofit [Central Asia Institute](#) has helped educate 58,000 children. Mortenson's activism was rooted in tragedy. To honor his sister, Christa, who died in 1992 of epilepsy, Mortenson attempted to climb K2, Earth's second-tallest mountain, and instead fell short and had to be nursed at a Pakistani village. In gratitude, he vowed to build the village a school -- and kept at the effort despite threats and an eight-day kidnapping by Taliban supporters in 1996. (His captors released him after eight days and, ironically, showered him with donations for his school project.) The 52-year-old Mortenson, who lives in Bozeman, Mont., has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize each of the last two years.



11. Linda A. Myers

The artist, who once sold woven sculptures at her own gallery in Park City, Utah, closed her business to dedicate her life to aiding the poor elderly in the vast Navajo territory in Utah and Arizona. Twice a year, teams of volunteers from Myers' [Adopt-A-Native-Elder Program](#) set out in caravans, delivering boxes of food and supplies to people 75 and older on remote parts of the reservation. Elders receive sugar, flour, canned foods, over-the-counter medicines and wheelchairs, enabling them to continue living on their own, often in traditional one-room hogans. Many recipients are rug weavers, some too old to care for their sheep. Myers' nonprofit assures that they get high-quality yarn and helps them to

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sell their rugs online and at an annual rug show near Park City. Now in her mid-50s, Myers recruits volunteers and solicits sponsors who «adopt» each native American elder for \$150 a year.

12. J. Craig Venter

Venter, who gained fame by mapping the human genome, now searches for break-throughs in medicine and clean energy at the nonprofit research center he founded in 2006. The [J. Craig Venter Institute](#) -- which operates in La Jolla, Calif., and Rockville, Md. -- also explores the legal and ethical questions that arise on the frontiers of science. In 2010, Venter announced the creation of the first self-replicating, synthetic bacterial cell, a discovery that might someday help power engines and devour fuel spills. «We really need to find an alternative to taking carbon out of the ground, burning it, and putting it in the atmosphere,» Venter told the journal *New Scientist*. «That is the single biggest contribution I could make.» The 64-year-old former entrepreneur used his yacht to conduct the Global Ocean Sampling Expedition, a worldwide effort that catalogued thousands of new marine species from 2004 to 2006.

13. Richard Walden

Walden, a former Beverly Hills attorney, set out to help Vietnamese boat people and Cambodian refugees after the Vietnam War. Using a donated cargo plane, he began airlifts to Malaysia and later arranged through an embassy in Moscow to fly directly into Phnom Penh, delivering \$3 million worth of aid. Walden's [Operation USA](#), based in Culver City, Calif., specializes in disaster relief and has evolved into one of the nation's highest-rated charities. In 2010, the organization shipped aid to quake-devastated Haiti and China and brought its total outlay in food and supplies to more than \$350 million. Walden, now 64, also was involved in helping landmine victims and developing technologies to find the explosive devices as part of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.



14. Marc Freedman

Freedman's encore career has been devoted to helping others thrive in encore careers --and, in the process, he is changing fundamental notions about how long people can work and be productive. Existing models are outmoded; human lifespans are edging upward toward 100 years, [Freedman recently told SecondAct](#). Civic Ventures, the San Francisco-based nonprofit founded by Freedman in 1998, educates people about making midlife career changes and gives annual cash awards of \$100,000 and \$50,000 -- the Purpose Prizes -- to encourage individuals (such as Dr. Judith Broder above) to commit to humanitarian causes. This year, [Civic Ventures](#) topped \$3 million in prize money granted since the awards program began five years ago. Freedman, who is 52, started out as a social researcher in Philadelphia and is the author of *Encore: Finding Work that Matters in the Second Half of Life*.

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15. John Wood

During a trek in the Himalayas in 1998, Wood experienced an epiphany when he toured a local school and its barren library. Wood, an avid reader, soon quit his lucrative marketing job at Microsoft to devote himself to sending books to Nepal and other impoverished nations. As [described recently at SecondAct](#), Wood's nonprofit organization, [Room to Read](#), marked its 10th anniversary this year by having shipped more than 7 million volumes to 5 million youngsters throughout Asia and Africa. The San Francisco-based charity also has built 1,100 schools and 10,000 libraries and funded 9,000 scholarships. At the 2010 Clinton Global Initiative, Wood, now 46, committed to helping 1 million girls get a better education by 2012 -- a task that will involve an ambitious training program for teachers. Wood detailed his saga in the book *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World: An Entrepreneur's Odyssey to Educate the World's Children*. «I'm probably on the road 250 days of the year,» he told SecondAct. «I travel more than I've ever traveled, but it's my passion. I'm working 24/7 with a smile on my face.»

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