

ARTS & TRAVEL ISSUE

Town & Country

PHILIPPINE EDITION

**DEDES
ZOBEL**
A HIGHER
PURPOSE

**VALERIA
CAVESTANY**

**SUZE
ORMAN**

**PANNONICA
DE KOENIGSWARTER**

**MICHELLE
OBAMA**

**PLUS: THERE'S
NO PLACE
LIKE ROME!**

MARCH 2009

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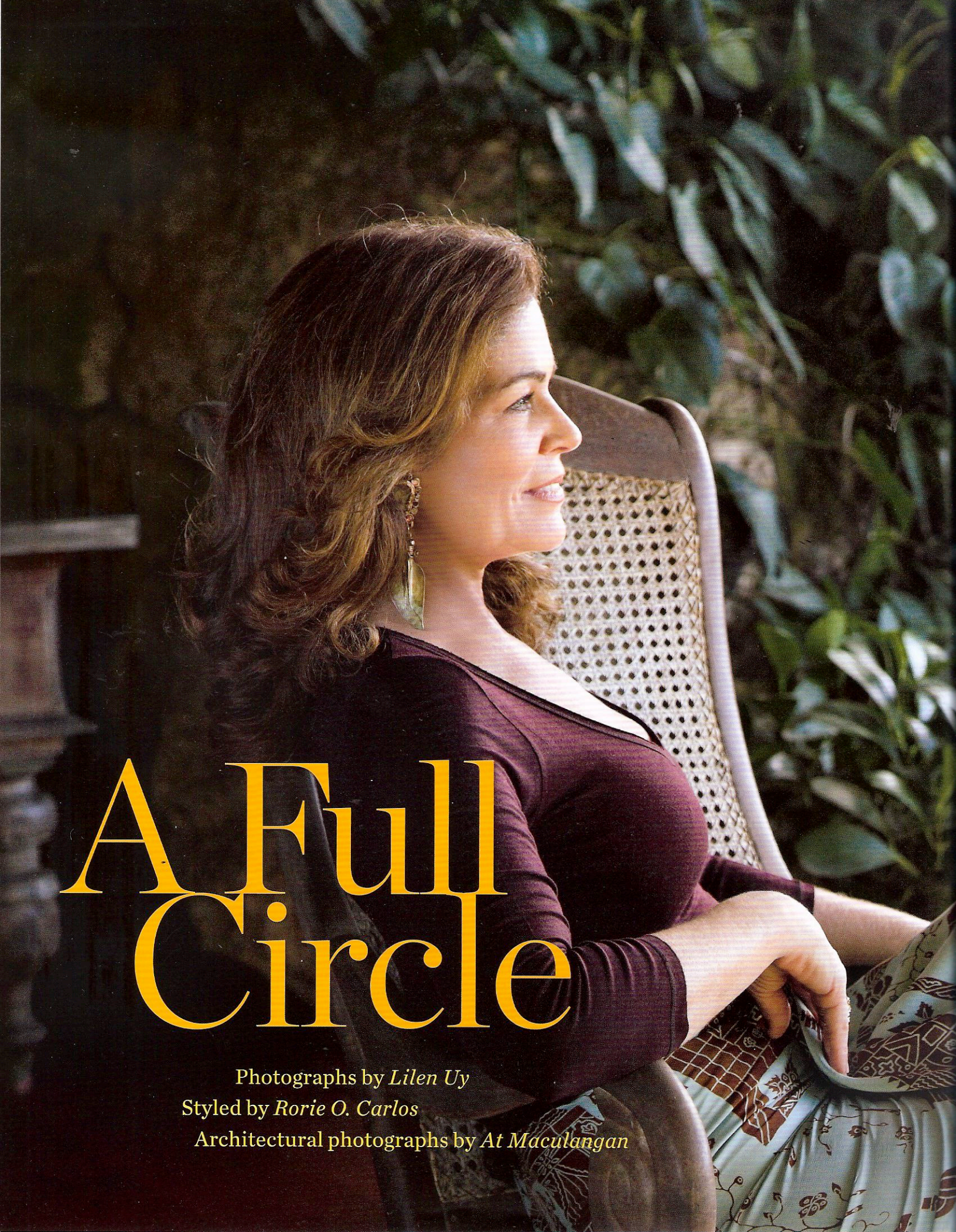
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TOWN AND COUNTRY

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A Full Circle

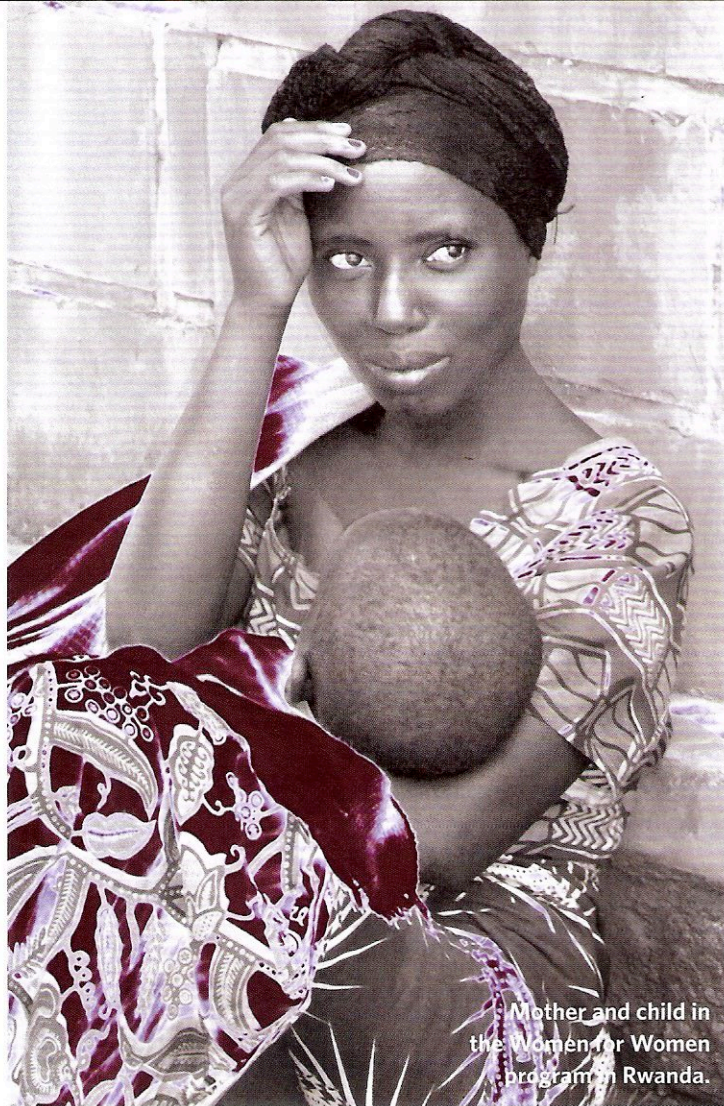
Photographs by *Lilen Uy*

Styled by *Rorie O. Carlos*

Architectural photographs by *At Maculangan*



DEDES ZOBEL shares
how her most rewarding
discovery was the joy of
giving time, and realizing
that a life lived around the
world is sometimes meant
to just bring you home.
By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon



Mother and child in the Women for Women program in Rwanda.

“THEIR VOICES SPEAK quietly but if you listen closely, you can hear the screams behind their silence.” As Mercedes “Dedes” Zobel tells us why she has dedicated the last two years of her life to helping women who have suffered the devastation of war, the intensity of her words mirrors the compassion in her electric blue-green eyes: “I want you to imagine yourself in their position for just one minute. You have been raped repeatedly by men who have destroyed your village. Your children have been killed or also raped in front of you. On top of that, you are then expelled by your community because you have been raped. There is nowhere for you to go and you have no skills to earn a living, nor money to feed whoever is left in your family.” Her conviction is almost infectious: “These women see no hope for the future. It is impossible not to want to help them.”

Like a character in a novel whose story can be fully appreciated only by examining its layers, Zobel’s life has unfolded in distinct chapters, each one set in different parts of the world and revealing a different side of her ever-evolving character. She says, “In each country I have been someone different and there is the potential of adapting to different cultures and exploring the different parts of me. I really love that!” Her inner determination and sense of what inspires her has been her only compass and her fearless and focused nature, her momentum.

A rare combination of practicality and free-spiritedness, Zobel credits her family for teaching her important lessons at a young age: “They gave me a sense of discipline and dedication to being interested in a lot of subjects. I learned the importance of pursuing my passions and following my instincts. I guess I was lucky to have great teachers who influenced my youth and I thank the gods for that blessing.”

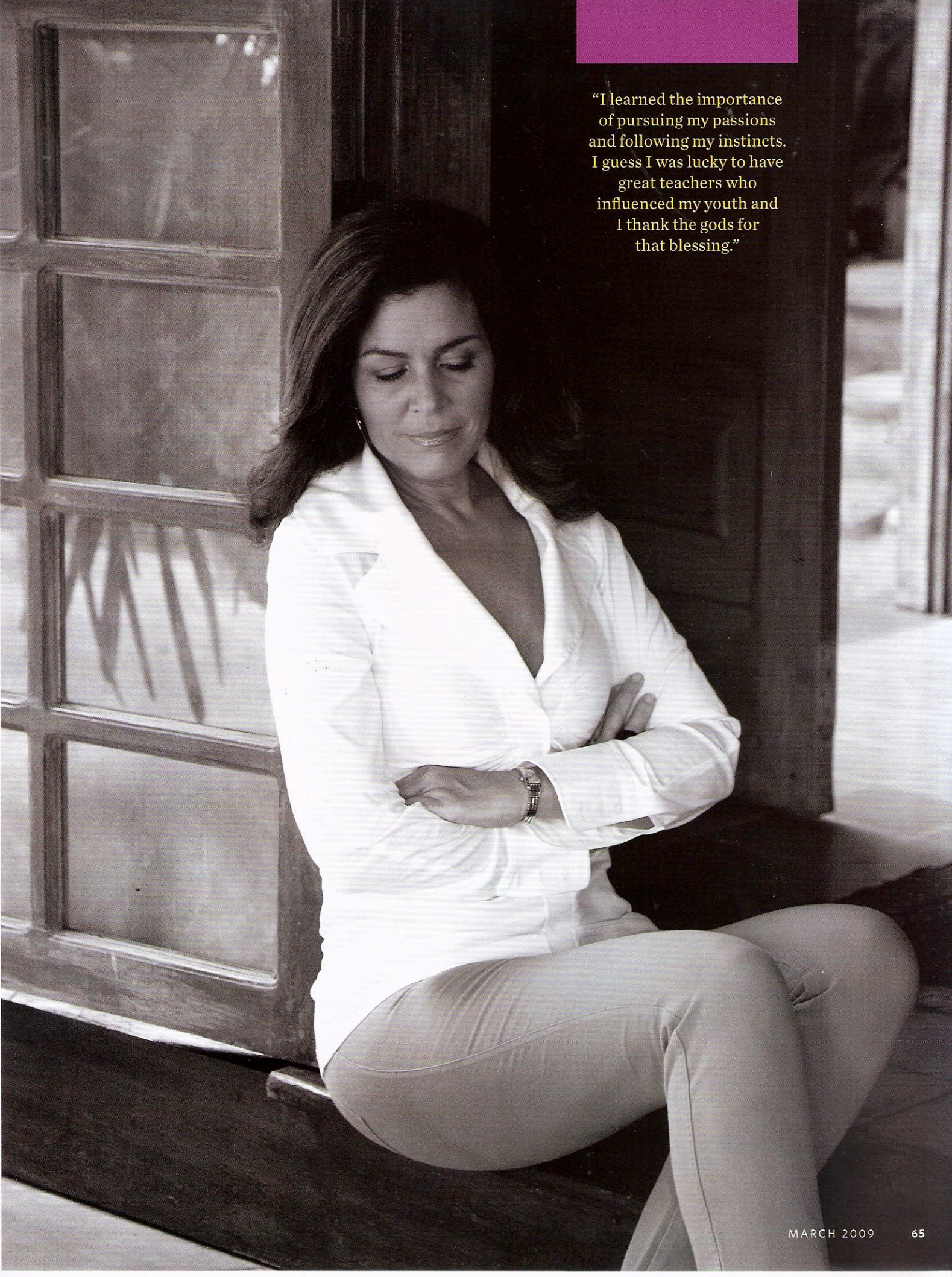
After a childhood in the Philippines that strengthened her roots, Zobel started boarding school in England at the age of eleven, eventually earning both a degree in interior design and a diploma in art history. Aside from an innate desire to explore the world, her love of the artistic is another integral part of who she really is. With summers spent in the company of her uncle Fernando Zobel, and other artists such as Saura, Sempere, Torner, Bonifacio, Aviado and Cabrera in Cuenca (Spain), she essentially grew up in a world that encouraged creativity: “Although design is my greatest passion, I was always drawn to beauty whether it be film, art, architecture, design, antiques or fashion.”

After finishing college, she returned to Manila to train at Ayala Corporation, which was an exciting exercise to learn more about the family holdings. Soon after, she fell in love and decided to move to Singapore where she married her first husband, Pierre. “Singapore was where I seriously started to learn to work,” she remembers with a smile, recalling the four years she spent running her first business, OZ Designers, a company that specialized in designing interiors and furniture for commercial projects.

Although, happy to have exercised the business-minded side of her nature, she eventually craved a place where her equally strong artistic spirit could flourish freely. The island of Bali would become her next home, and it was here that she lived with her second husband, Carlo, and gave birth to her only child, Ava. Her voice fades to dreamy, as she reminisces, “It must have been what Gauguin saw when he went to Tahiti—untouched and full of a very special spirit. I had always felt inexplicably drawn to the island’s magic. When we moved there, I felt a special part of me had ‘arrived.’”

The time she spent in Bali was for exploring both her creativity and her spirituality. She and Carlo started their own line of hand-crafted furniture and opened the first factory to produce hotel furniture in Bali. Following a successful business model they had previously set up in Singapore, UNLD Designs, they decided to also open hotel-based lifestyle concept shops selling a combination of antiques, furniture, accessories and men’s and women’s fashion.

The free-flowing rhythm of the Balinese also left a valuable imprint—this self-possessed woman’s unshakable aura of calm: “It’s difficult to make me angry because I learned to accept that things will turn out the way they are meant to be. With this attitude, you can adjust to anything or at least keep your frustrations moderated, so they don’t lead you astray.”



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When Ava was eight, Zobel separated from Carlo and moved to Sydney with her daughter. Many people might be afraid of starting a life in a new country, but to this adventurous lady, moving forward to explore new horizons was almost like breathing. She confesses, "With most things in my life, once I have an idea of the direction I want to take, it's as if I have to do it or I do not feel right about myself." Her self-analysis continues, "I don't always know how I will manage to do things, but I believe that keeping focused and positive inevitably results in things falling into place."

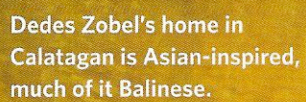
Aside from being attracted to the unexplored and vast nature of the continent, this hands-on mother wanted Ava to have a broader education and an exposure to city life. A childhood in Bali had given Ava a free spirit and a wonderful connection to nature but deep down Zobel knew the importance of preparing her daughter for a life that was not always so isolated and free. The "soft city life" of Sydney was a perfect training ground for Ava to learn the discipline of city living.

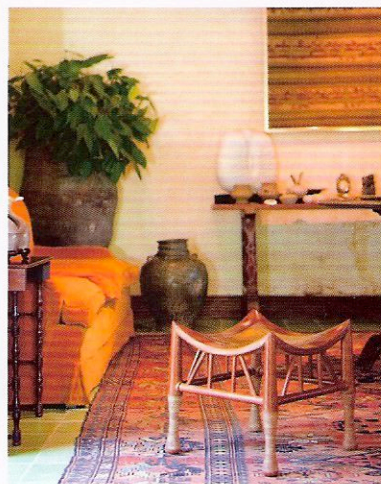
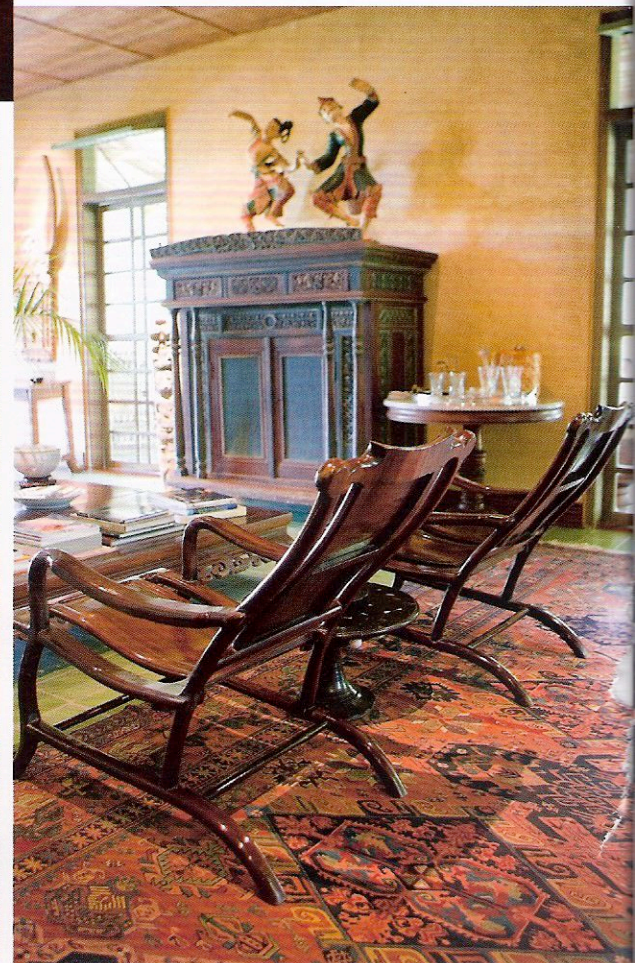
"Life in Australia was a bit of a spa because I didn't do that much," Zobel says with characteristic candor. She acknowledged that the four years she spent following a relaxed routine of healthy eating and exercising, and having all the free time to spend with her daughter were exactly what she needed to regenerate herself after ending an intense and passionate sixteen-year relationship. The reality that both her marriages ended in great friendships reveals much about her open-minded character. She reveals, "I married two exceptional men and the fact that things did not go as we planned does not change that. It's vital to be decent to each other and resolve things in the best possible way. We learned to move on and not resent the past but to learn from it."

Sometimes, when life offers you space to breathe, it gives you the chance to give new meaning to each breath you take. In Zobel's case, a cocktail party in Sydney given in honor of Zainab Salbi, a highly educated, charismatic and exotic yet humble Iraqi lady would serve as the catalyst for this growth. Within five minutes of listening to Salbi's story, Zobel found herself walking through a door that would lead her into another unexpected dimension.

The impact of their first conversation on her was monumental. Zobel recalls, "Anyone who meets her becomes awed by her aura. She is so humble and positive that you feel a special energy not common in most. Since the age of twenty-three, Zainab has been devoted to helping women who have been in the worst situations imaginable, and unlike any other person I knew, this was her sole motivation." She adds, "Seeing the honesty in what she was doing attracted me to her. In all the travels I had experienced, I had never met anyone like her."

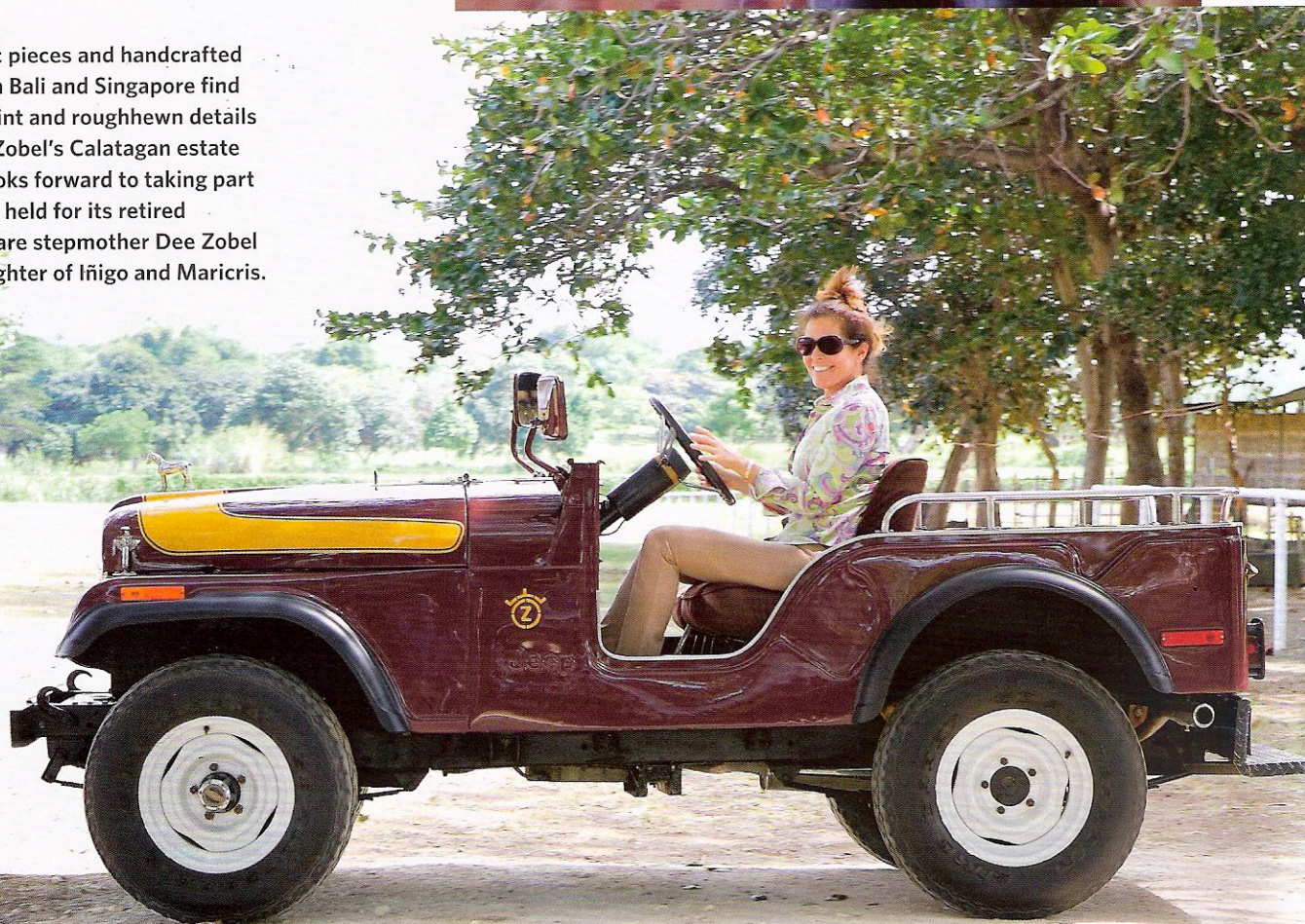
Women for Women International (WFW), the nonprofit organization started by Salbi fourteen years ago, provides women survivors of war with the resources they need to enable them to tran-







Art and ethnographic pieces and handcrafted furniture mainly from Bali and Singapore find an easy fit in the quaint and roughhewn details of the house. At the Zobel's Calatagan estate (top right), Dedes looks forward to taking part in the year-end party held for its retired workforce. With her are stepmother Dee Zobel and niece Rocio, daughter of Iñigo and Maricris.



sition from being victims, to survivors, to self-supporting members of their communities. With operations in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sudan, the WFW has already empowered 153,000 women to rebuild their world.

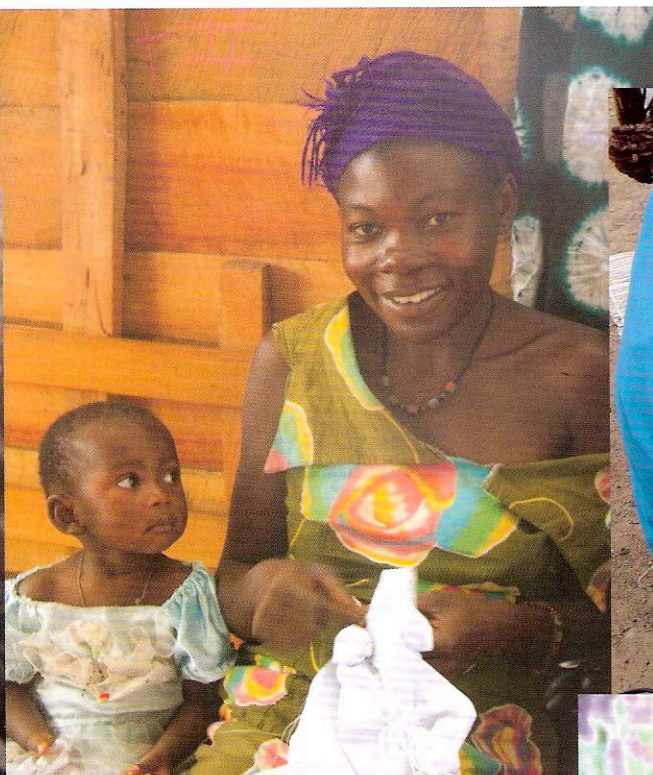
The organization's comprehensive approach to healing is global in concept yet its programs are tailored to meet the unique demands of each country's religious, cultural and ethnic customs and beliefs. The complex road to each woman's recovery begins with a sponsorship program where a monthly donation of \$27 for each woman is provided by a "sponsor" and helps cover the basic costs of food, water and medicine. These women and their sponsors are also encouraged to exchange letters. Once their immediate needs are cared for, the women join a year-long weekly program, called "Renewing Life Skills for Women."

Groups of twenty women at a time are taught civil rights awareness, leadership education, and vocational and technical skills training. It is in this phase that they begin to create the building blocks of their new lives. As many of them have grown up believing that abuse by men is an accepted part of life, simply learning that they have a choice to say no is a vital first step to recovering their sense of self. They are then given job skills training as well as access to the capital or micro credit financing which is essential to starting their own business.

When Zobel realized that Salbi had devoted the prime years of her life to working under such devastating and dangerous conditions, she felt very humbled. She says, "It made me think twice about what I thought were the achievements in my life. I knew that this was somebody I would have to help." At lunch the next day, Zobel explained to her new friend that she would soon be moving to London, to further her daughter's education, but told Salbi to call her if she wanted to expand the WFW's U.S.-based operations to Europe. She admits, "I had no idea at the time of how I would help her, as I didn't even have a life set up in London. But I said I would do whatever I could. I knew I would make a lot of friends and thought that perhaps helping her network would be a start."

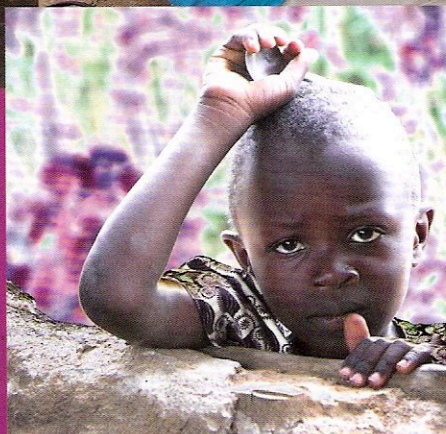
What started as a few drops of water soon became a waterfall, and Zobel found herself jumping in feet first! The ideas of the WFW were so well-received that an introduction to twenty well-placed friends quickly snowballed into the creation of a London office, a board of directors, a youth leadership program for younger supports and the production of annual fund-raising events. As an extremely active board member, Zobel helps the organization in any way she can—from innovative fund-raising projects, to her most recent initiative using her design background and manufacturing experience to search for new markets and to expand the scope of crafts-oriented livelihood projects in countries where the program operates.





Women for Women provides women survivors of war and conflict with the resources they need to enable them to transition from being victims, to survivors, to self-supporting members of their communities.

"Their experience with abuse is so extreme that they need more than a handout and support. They need a creative outlet for their pain and this eventually becomes their livelihood. It also gives them the confidence that they can do things for themselves. It's a beautiful gift to give someone the chance to feel better about herself."



Although Zobel has always been a great supporter of charitable causes, she has never before been so actively involved as she is now. The last two years she has dedicated to WFW have taught her that giving time is as important as giving financially. She explains, "Being able to put to use all the things I have learned in my life is so rewarding. Basically I just create possibilities for others, using contacts and ideas. Once you start, you realize how easy it is to help! You just need to have the desire to create change."

Zobel is currently spearheading the organization of two fund-raising events. The first is a Women's Day Exhibition, a festival of the arts designed by Norman Foster, to be held on March 5 at the Albion Gallery. This event will promote awareness of the work of Women for Women International and support its yearly sponsorship program. Visitors will enjoy related video projections, installations and photo exhibits as well as a souk which will sell products by women being helped in the different countries. Women for Women's second fund-raising gala will be held in London's Natu-

ral History Museum on May 7, with Queen Rania of Jordan attending as the charity's global ambassador. Hollywood's Angelina Jolie and France's First Lady Carla Bruni are also ardent supporters of the WFW and have been asked to attend and speak at the gala as well.

Volunteers of all ages, nationalities and professions have been attracted to the WFW. Zobel describes what she feels is the organization's unusual appeal: "They allow you to do anything to help—not just give a donation. They draw you in by wanting you to participate in any way possible. Whether you are a banker, lawyer, artist or housewife, your natural skills will always be put to use."

Although Zobel's creative background naturally drew her to help promote the WFW's arts and crafts, she reveals a deeper motivation. "It gives these women therapy," she says. "Their experience with abuse is so extreme that they need more than a handout and support. They need a creative outlet for their pain and this eventually becomes their livelihood. It also gives them the confi-

dence that they can do things for themselves. It's a beautiful gift to give someone the chance to feel better about herself."

She feels that working in an organization run by women for other women has a special appeal: "There seems to be less of an ego. We're all willing to help each other without anyone necessarily wanting to be the boss. Women are networkers by nature and naturally help each other." She highlights her motivation: "It is also rewarding to know that we are not just talking about it. Our teamwork and faith make things really happen."

Traveling to Rwanda and Bosnia to meet the women in the programs has ensured that her commitment remains unwavering and lifelong. She recalls, "The sadness in their eyes is haunting. They have endured so much pain that they don't know how to smile or laugh anymore. But I have noticed that as soon as they do the one-year program, they start to sing and dance again." She adds, "You just want to give them an opportunity to see something else in their life. The knowledge we offer these women is something that they will teach and pass on to their children, so we are not just helping women, but the next generation as well."

Zobel excitedly shares the most life-changing lessons which working with WFW has taught her. She says, "I hope to inspire women to feel strong and follow their instincts. I have learned that by doing things for others, you actually help yourself. I realize it's a flow of life and if you give your time and good intentions, it will come back to you in wonderful ways." With a loving partner, Robin, who patiently lets her be and work towards what is most important to her, and a daughter who is old enough to start leading her own life, Zobel feels more fulfilled with her life at this stage. She says, "Since there is such a huge inequality in this world and I feel more privileged than most, I feel I have to take a greater stand of obligation to help those in need. I have reached an age where I am happy with my personal achievements, and I think that it's time to do what I can to help as many people as possible and as quickly as possible."

If the path of Zobel's life up to this point has resembled an arc, her latest inspiration has caused that arc to complete itself in a full circle. Horrified by the increasing number of people still living in extreme poverty in the Philippines, she has decided to use her energy towards helping the people in a country she says "feels like home." She admits that when she used to visit Manila, she actually looked forward to leaving because seeing the country's deterioration and increasing poverty depressed her. But now her perspective has changed. She declares, "Now that I have experienced firsthand how people can work together to overcome the most unimaginable challenges, I realize I have to do everything to help the Philippines fulfill its enormous potential."

Aware of the immense challenges facing the country, this visionary is determined to mobilize those who she believes have the

means and the influence to plant seeds of change. These concerns—whether protecting the environment, safeguarding the rights of women and children, improving and expanding educational, providing livelihood training, preserving cultural heritage, promoting visual and performing arts or generating employment—are unquestionably related to one another. Therefore she believes any attempt at providing solutions must be done simultaneously, and comprehensively before it is too late.

Every movement for change has its own rhythm. The idea that problems need to be tackled by a community working together and not as individuals is central to the organization that Zobel is forming. She affirms, "If we each become more focused on our area of expertise and approach the problems with discipline and with each other, I am confident that we can make a huge difference very quickly."

Aware of the high number of charities, foundations and non-governmental organizations already working to help specific causes, she envisions an NGO which will, as a starting point, promote and facilitate cooperation and regular communication among the most effective of already existing organizations. She says, "There are so many ways in which they can support each other's projects and work together to help each other achieve more impact." The creation of a central website where all those involved can immediately inject and respond to information on one another's projects is a vital first step. Finding ways to market and publicize the positive work being achieved is another. Zobel firmly believes, she says, that "if everyone involved is able to maximize what they already have in place, whether contacts, funding opportunities, etc, and use what skills they already have to help the causes most dear to them, the progress will come naturally and everyone will prosper."

"It's easy to be so overwhelmed by the enormity of what needs to be done that you are paralyzed into inaction," she admits, but continues, "However, we will suggest ideas to support the underprivileged." The pace of change happening is at a crawl. This is why Zobel is convinced that if the right people agree to collaborate, effective change can happen in the near rather than distant future.

Perhaps this engaging lady summarizes her life's journey best when she states, "I have done so many things in many countries, and I have learned so many lessons along the way. I have my PhD in living, and now I am ready to give back the best of my experiences to my beloved Philippines." Her dreams of what humanity can achieve are so filled with passion and purpose as to be inspiring. There are people who can motivate others to turn their ideas of helping into reality, and she is certainly one of them. Perhaps this is her special gift, or perhaps it is just that she believes in synchronicity so wholeheartedly that synchronicity also believes in her. ❖

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