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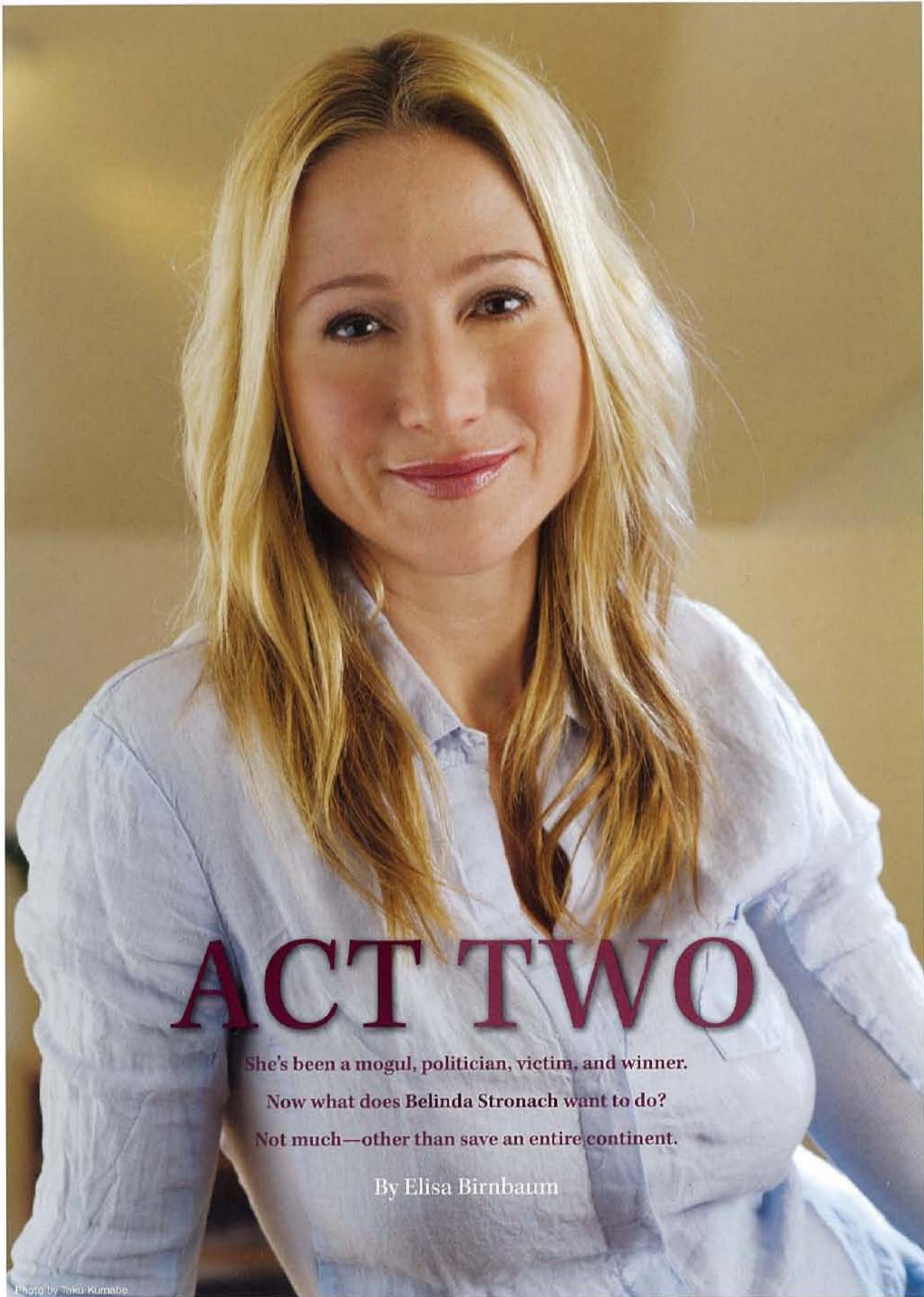
Being Belinda

OUT OF POLITICS—AND THE PUBLIC EYE—BELINDA STRONACH IS READY FOR THE (NEXT) FIGHT OF HER LIFE.

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ACT TWO

She's been a mogul, politician, victim, and winner.

Now what does Belinda Stronach want to do?

Not much—other than save an entire continent.

By Elisa Birnbaum

Photo by Taku Kumabe



There should be a sign posted in front of the freshly minted Toronto office of The Belinda Stronach Foundation that reads: ROLL UP SLEEVES BEFORE ENTERING. If anyone was expecting airs or even a hint of pretension, they'd be disappointed. And at the center of this new venture, on this day dressed in blue jeans and a casual black top, with nary a stitch of makeup, the executive vice-chair of Magna International—Canada's largest automotive parts manufacturer—is the epitome of down-to-earth. That's not to say Belinda Stronach doesn't look good. The 42-year-old tycoon is beaming and appears to be at the top of her game, despite a ski injury, which explains the metal splint hugging her left knee. Indeed, the former politico emits a certain understated elegance, a dignified confidence and sense of purpose that flows from the inside out.

And so it should. For, in her newest incarnation, the Honorable Ms. Stronach (her proper title as lifelong member of the Government of Canada's Privy Council) is seemingly ensconced in her element. Championing some of Canada and the world's more pressing issues, pursuing grassroots solutions for those less fortunate, Stronach is both activist and advocate. The roles aren't new, however, they've simply found a new home. "I just think it's part of who I am," she explains. "It bothers me to see an injustice, and if you can do something about it, then you should." Stronach hopes her efforts will help motivate others, too. "By creating greater awareness, hopefully, other people will step up."

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What inspired Stronach's own step up—way up—was a life-changing trip to Africa in 2005. Joining Jeffrey Sachs, director of the UN Millennium Project and the Earth Institute at Columbia University, and accompanied by comedian friend Rick Mercer, Stronach met with top African leaders and traveled extensively, seeing the region's extreme poverty and desolation from up close. With Sachs and his wealth of information as their guide, Stronach and Mercer received a crash course in the complex challenges at work in Africa and the tools available to alleviate them, as well as promote self-sufficiency, and a greater way of life.

Stronach and Mercer returned to Canada clear on one thing: they had to act. The only question was how. "There are so many great causes and I'm often asked where I should put my energies and efforts," she explains. "But at some point you have to just pick one, one that you're attracted to, that resonates with you, that you feel passionate about." They decided on malaria. Not only was the disease profoundly impacting individuals—the number one killer of kids in Africa, and estimated to cost the African continent at least \$12 billion in lost revenue—but a solution was simple and concrete. "People like tangible things,"

echoes Stronach. "And it was something we personally could get our heads around."

Enter Spread the Net, a grassroots campaign with a huge online presence that raises awareness and funds to help UNICEF purchase and distribute insecticide-treated bed nets to families in Liberia and Rwanda, all in the name of fighting malaria. Recipient countries are chosen deliberately ensuring they're equally committed to the cause. Liberia,

Belinda Stronach



for example, was a no-brainer thanks to its president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state. Stronach calls her a beacon of hope and a role model for others to follow—herself included. It's not hard to see why. Despite facing death threats, corruption, and the challenges of rebuilding a war-torn nation, the "iron lady," as she's known, is a leader of strength and conviction. "When I look at the obstacles she had to overcome to get to where she is, I feel what I've done doesn't even compare," states Stronach deferentially, adding that leaders like Johnson-Sirleaf need the support of the international community now more than ever. "We need them to succeed."

The goal of Spread the Net is to raise \$5 million and provide 500,000 bed nets in three years. Now in its second year, the initiative has already surpassed the 350,000 mark, having raised \$3.5 million. And consider this: that's without any major advertising. "I cannot believe what a viral success this has been," enthuses foundation president Farah Mohamed, crediting Canadians for their commitment. Spread the Net's true success lies in its grassroots approach and the unyielding support of its youthful activists. In fact, one of its most popular programs is the Mercer-inspired Student Challenge, whereby colleges, universities, and high schools compete to see which institution

can raise the most fundraising dollars.

During last year's launch at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, 2,500 students showed up to lend their support. "That was so inspiring," Stronach recalls. "You say to yourself, 'yeah, this is definitely worth it.'" Finding creative ways to raise funds, students are certainly working hard. "Belinda and I have the easy part," Mercer offers. "We founded it and we promote it, but the heavy lifting is done by those kids." So much for youth as indifferent. "You give them something to believe in, and a vehicle they can work with, and they rise to the challenge," says Mohamed. Stronach agrees. Socially engaged and aware, young people are involved, she says.

Spread the Net eventually morphed into other projects as well. "One of our philosophies is we want to do things," says Stronach, "we're not just about writing checks." That approach has forged new partnerships with other organizations and individuals committed to similar causes. "We're happy to partner and do something really important, impactful, profound and efficient." One such opportunity arose when former News Corp COO, Peter Chernin, chairman and co-founder of NGO Malaria No More, asked Stronach to lead the organization's Canadian affiliate.

And then there's the partnership with Tony Blair's Faith

Belinda Stronach

Foundation. Demonstrating that faith can be a powerful tool for good, the organization focuses much of its energy on advancing the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG). And with malaria falling under the MDG purview, it's become a priority all parties can agree upon. Though the partnership is relatively new, the two chairs communicate regularly and have already committed to working on a few projects together. In fact, Stronach recently joined Blair in Toronto at a roundtable of 30 faith leaders and a contingent of youth representatives. The historic meeting launched an interfaith forum on how best to meet MDG commitments and catalyze young people in the process.

But malaria eradication is not the only health-related initiative of The Belinda Stronach Foundation. They're also researching programs to combat neglected tropical diseases, currently affecting close to a billion of the world's

the hope is to empower women in Canada and abroad. The plight of women is an issue close to Stronach's heart. She recalls funding a worldwide study on girls' education as a board member of the Center for Global Development in Washington a number of years ago. The conclusions weren't pretty: at that time, 60 million girls still didn't have access to primary education. That astonishing figure has had a lasting impact, as have Stronach's travels where she witnessed the devastating effects of gender inequality.

As chair of the National Liberal Women's Caucus, Stronach's worked closely with a host of women's organizations nationwide, and produced two volumes of the *Pink Book*, exploring—from a woman's perspective—issues affecting their economic security and well-being and providing recommendations where needed. "We did some extremely good work," states Stronach effusively of

You can make a difference, it just takes time. All great things in life worth achieving don't come easy; the key is to stick with it and work hard.

poorest citizens. And domestically, Stronach recently established The Belinda Stronach Chair in Breast Cancer Reconstructive Surgery at Toronto General Hospital. A more personal initiative to be sure—herself a breast cancer survivor—Stronach was amazed to learn only 10 percent of women in Canada have access to the reconstruction procedure. "It's part of the healing process," she asserts emphatically. "It's a big deal if you can look and feel as normal as possible." Designed to keep physicians updated on current reconstructive procedures and to increase its availability, \$1.2 million of the chair's \$2 million goal has already been raised.

Another major focus of the foundation is aboriginal youth. Though full details are still under wraps, what we do know is, through the innovative use of technology—and working in tandem with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—the program will provide students in Canada's aboriginal communities with entrepreneurial skills and access to role models, elevating their chances for successful futures. The initiative will move forward in partnership with Richard Branson's foundation, Virgin Unite Canada.

Girls and young women round out the foundation's other area of concentration. Through education, advocacy, role models, and the tried-and-true grassroots approach,

the caucus and its partners. A few of the suggestions were even adopted years later, a testament to Stronach's deep-seated conviction that, with enough effort, people can effect change. "You can make a difference, it just takes time," she offers, adding pensively, "all great things in life worth achieving don't come easy; the key is to stick with it and work hard." And it's hard to imagine where Stronach would be today without those principles fortifying her every step. Professionally, they may help explain a growing list of accolades, including being named a Young Global Leader of Tomorrow by the World Economic Forum, one of Canada's Top 40 Under 40, and one of the world's most influential people by *Time* magazine.

One thing's for sure: though she bid political life adieu in 2008, what brought Stronach to public office in the first place—the desire to make a difference and the belief that she could—continues to guide and inspire her. And to those who view public life through a veil of cynicism, Stronach is quick to uphold its merits. "I think you can achieve great things with politics," she says. To be sure, as Minister of Human Resource and Skills Development and Minister responsible for Democratic Renewal, Belinda Stronach brought a unique blend of skills and experience to former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin's cabinet.

Belinda Stronach



Stronach with Canadian sponsored students in Haiti.
Photo courtesy of The Belinda Stronach Foundation



Stronach at Sacred Heart Catholic High School in Newmarket, Ont. for Spread the Net.
Photo courtesy of The Belinda Stronach Foundation

entering because it's also extremely rewarding." She's particularly pleased that younger women are showing greater interest in political life. "What I like is they say, 'I don't have to conform to a typical stereotype, I can be proud of who I am and make a difference.'" And though she squirms at the idea of being a role model, Stronach still takes pride knowing she may have inspired others. While running for the Conservative leadership, Stronach recalls meeting parents and hearing them recount how their daughters excitedly asked them, "You mean a woman can be prime minister of Canada?" (obviously too young to remember Kim Campbell). That belief in possibilities is powerful, says Stronach. "The great thing is when a young person sets a higher goal for themselves, thinking this is something they can actually do."

Still, she cautions potential politicians to establish a career path before climbing up Parliament Hill to ensure independent thought and the freedom to walk away if need be. "You need that independence to be able to make those tough decisions, to weigh various interests at stake and the position of the party you represent," she

And contrary to rumors that Stronach's frustration with politics prompted her final bow, she says it couldn't be further from the truth. With her kids—a 17-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter—growing up fast, she wanted to dedicate more time to family. And then there was the matter of a call back to Magna. The distant whiff of an economic downturn was enough to put the company in serious strategy mode. And with Stronach a highly valued corporate asset, there wasn't much of a choice. "I think people can see perhaps why I left now, with the circumstances we're in."

But Stronach remains an advocate for a career in public office, even encouraging others with similar inclinations. "I think it's important that people see government as a noble calling and if they have the interest, they should consider

says. "And sometimes those may be at odds." You could say Stronach knows a thing or two about thinking independently—and being at odds. Though she launched her political career as a member of the Conservatives in 2004, she gained notoriety when she crossed the House of Commons floor to join the Liberals a year later. It was a controversial decision, but it was one for which Belinda Stronach bears no regrets. Bottom line? Stay true to your principles, no matter what, she says. "I like to sleep at night. I like to look in the mirror and say, 'I'm comfortable with that decision, though it may have been a tough one.'"

She views the victorious election that followed her momentous crossover as one of her greatest political accomplishments. "Getting reelected in a different party by a much greater majority was not only a great relief, it also

Belinda Stronach

*I can be proud
of who I am
and make
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Photo by Taku Kumabe

meant a great deal to me because I felt the community really understood why I did it," she explains, adding, "and, by and large, they felt I did it for the right reasons, that I believed it was in the community's best interest."

No doubt, a commitment to community has been a constant in Stronach's life, with philanthropy an integral part of her vernacular. Mercer speaks highly of his friend's tendency to give wherever and however she can. "Her altruism is 100 percent sincere and that's what I find so endearing about her," Mohamed agrees. "What I see in Belinda is someone who's incredibly passionate, who knows she can make a difference and is inclusive," she says. As for Stronach, she simply shrugs "It's how I'm hardwired," she says. "I've always appreciated the good fortunes I have." And after traveling to the most destitute parts of the developing world, that good fortune is made all the more apparent.

She also guesses her charitable sensibility may have something to do with her father, Frank Stronach, founder and chairman of Magna International. Having grown up in a very poor family, he arrived at Canada's doorstep with \$200 in his pocket and built the family's first cement block house with his own hands. "He doesn't forget any of that," his daughter says of her father's immigrant experience. She then recalls a lesson taught to her by her parents at an early age: it's important in life to be a good person. "It may have been one of the few things I listened to," she adds with a knowing smile.

The elder Stronach walks the walk, too. After Hurricane Katrina, he led the rescue efforts of hundreds of evacuees and helped build a new community in central Louisiana—

aply named Magnaville— for them to live in. On the home front, it was his decision to incorporate into Magna's constitutional framework a commitment to allocate a maximum of 2 percent of the company's pretax profits to support charitable, cultural, educational and political initiatives. Not surprisingly, with Frank Stronach's charitable imprint, Magna has established a number of programs with corporate social responsibility at their core.

His daughter is particularly proud of the Neighbourhood Network, a company initiative she recently launched. While in politics, Stronach's constituency office north of Toronto was often inundated with residents asking for various forms of help. Hoping to fill that ever-growing demand, Neighbourhood Network links local volunteers

with charities and nonprofit organizations in the community. Tapping into invaluable resources like the Internet and high school students looking to fulfill their 40 hours of required community service, the agency has taken off. "It doesn't require a ton of money, but some coordination and effort, so it's really a great platform," Stronach explains. It also demonstrates there are other ways to give aside from money.

Talking about time, with professional commitments at their peak, where does Stronach find enough hours in the day to start a foundation? "You make the time," she states matter-of-factly. In fact, a quintessential multitasker, Stronach makes time for plenty of other things, too, like taking up running at the age of 42 and becoming a silent partner in Simmons Records, the new Canadian record label started by KISS front man Gene Simmons. But, Stronach assures mischievously, that partnership will prove beneficial to the foundation as well. "One of our strategies is to have a great ambassador base," she adds, explaining it can help achieve awareness. Welcome, Ambassador Simmons.

It's not surprising for Stronach to turn the conversation back to her foundation. After all, family and Magna aside, it's where she feels the most passionate and where her strong sense of obligation lies. She recalls a quote by Canadian social activist and journalist June Callwood, who said, "If any of you happen to see an injustice, you are no longer a spectator, you are a participant. And you have an obligation to do something."

Here, Stronach pauses and then adds, "I'm trying to do something about it." **LM**