Did eBay always have a social mission?
Absolutely. Always, from the very start, the success of the community was the success of the company. One of the things that we were proudest of was that there were people who were buying and selling on eBay that were able to improve their lives substantially. It was because they had access to a level playing field, something that they had never had before. So single mothers were able to stay at home with their kids and make a living, disabled folks were able to make a living. Seniors, who couldn’t get around too well, were able to make a living, and they were also able to communicate with a lot of other people.

Because of the nature of how eBay started there was a lot of collector-oriented material being sold on the site. A lot of times the seniors might be experts in a particular field. All of a sudden, rather than being isolated in their homes and unable to see many people, they are able to share their knowledge online with other people who really appreciate it.

So there was a very good combination of heart and wallet from the start. In the genes of the company was a recognition of the importance of giving back to the community as the company grew. That led to the eBay Foundation, which was unique at the time. It was the first foundation created with pre-IPO stock. It took a little bit of work to make it happen but once we did that it became a model that other companies have followed.

Was there a turning point where you thought it was time to do something instead of eBay?
Yes, I think so. The turning point for me probably came about two, two-and-a-half years, after eBay
had gone public in 1998. The company had reached the point where I felt comfortable that the management team could handle the company without me being there. Because of my involvement in the genesis of the company, until that point there was always something, some value or some knowledge, that I had of the way that this all worked. So I was very reluctant to let go. But once I felt that the values had been infused in the management team (and it is a superb group of senior managers, much more experienced than I was), once I felt that they had grasped the incredible importance of that community/company synergy and the values that held it together, at that point I felt comfortable moving on to start to pursue the dream I had of making a difference in the equation of inequities.

*What do you understand the term social entrepreneur to mean?*

At the Skoll Foundation we call social entrepreneurs society’s change agents: the pioneers of innovation for the social sector. I think there is a lot of overlap between social entrepreneurs and business entrepreneurs. Both see and act on what others miss, the opportunities to improve systems, to create solutions, to invent new approaches. Like business entrepreneurs these folks are also intensely focused, self-driven and very determined in pursuit of their vision. The biggest difference, though, is that whereas business entrepreneurs are going after a problem from purely an economic viewpoint, social entrepreneurs usually have a vision of something that they would like to solve in the social sector. They are not necessarily in it for materialistic or monetary remuneration for themselves.

I’ll leave it at that for the definition but I firmly believe that there is a groundswell. The concept of social entrepreneurship has been around for a very long time. The last 10 years, though, have brought an awareness of, and an infusion of people into, the field of social entrepreneurship. It’s important. The traditional approaches that we’ve had in society to address problems have been primarily through government or business, even technology and the advancement of technology. But a lot of people are realising and recognising that the social ills around the world are not going away and that the traditional approaches are not going to work. I think social entrepreneurs recognise this and they are dedicating their time and their talents to solving these social ills. I think their success will make or break how well we advance as a species over the next century.

*Is this groundswell a significant movement or is it a fad?*

I’m definitely in the camp that we are at the beginning of a massive movement. I think our best hope for the future is this group of dedicated people who are working to solve many of the social problems, the ills, around the world. I think of the parallel to 100 years ago when the field of business was starting to take root. Back then it was kind of a groundswell, a lot of activity, but nobody was formally examining the principles and underpinnings of what was going on. It was right around that time that we began to see business schools and academic institutions take an interest in that field.

Look at the research done by Bill Drayton, a leading social entrepreneur who founded Ashoka. He’s done some studies and it seems that the non-profit world has been the fastest-growing sector of employment all over the world. In the US, for example, the number of non-profits has doubled over the last 10 years from 500,000 to one million. Even in the developing world, in a
country like Brazil, it has gone from about a thousand non-profits to one million over a 20-year span. So the growth is huge and I think that people are starting to notice this. I really don’t think it is a fad.

Can you teach social entrepreneurship or is it something that they have in them?
I think that there are examples of great social entrepreneurs who have come from the grassroots, not from study, and who have not tried to develop the tools and the knowledge structures with which they could improve their effectiveness. But I would say that those are few and far between. Many of the most successful social entrepreneurs that I’ve seen in my travels have had at least some level of study in some area that has contributed to their later success with their social enterprise. This programme at Said will, I think, be the first programme that is really directly targeted at these people and their mission in life, and at providing them with the tools to go ahead and pursue that.

What do you look for at the Skoll Foundation when you are deciding to make a contribution to a social entrepreneur?
We are quite analytical when we look at the people who approach us, regarding their plans, or their next stage of evolution. We look at four qualities: The entrepreneurial quality of the idea. How innovative is it? How much of a breakthrough is it? Is it designed to effect systemic change?

Then we look for traction. Generally we do not fund early-stage social entrepreneurs but social entrepreneurs who have already demonstrated that they have a viable programme that is on its way to effecting systemic change.

The third quality is capacity. Nothing happens without individuals but nothing lasts without institutions. We look at how the social entrepreneurs are building the capacity to drive their innovation forward. Because innovation without a base of resources, the right people and so on behind it probably won’t go as far as it could otherwise.

And then the fourth quality that we look for is integrity; that the social entrepreneur just rings true; that these are people that really walk their talk; that they are absolutely dedicated and that they have the power of their convictions and also know how to mobilise and inspire other people to join them.

So on the one hand we have a 100-point scale and we weigh different criteria rigorously. But on the other, we have what I would call the “ping” test – do they ring true? In nearly every case it is very clear whether a person is a social entrepreneur or whether they are an effective non-profit leader but probably not a social entrepreneur.

A social entrepreneur is very driven towards measurable impact. For example, someone like Roshaneh Zafar, founder of the Kashf Foundation, is working in Pakistan and actually opening micro-finance institutions, opening thousands of them. She is very aware of what the metrical progression is for her work to get to a scale where she is really transforming the economic possibilities for the women of Pakistan.

Which project are you most passionate about?
I’m passionate about a few of them. It’s kind of like which of your children do you love most. I’ll say this. I’ve been spending time with a few projects more than others. Most recently, this year I spent a fair bit of time with a fellow by the name of Bill Strickland. He is an inner-city educator in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who created a centre there that really transformed the inner city. Now he is building these centres in other cities around the US.

His programme in Pittsburgh is called the Manchester Craftsman’s Guild. He takes about 2,000 at-risk high-school students and young adults into his programmes primarily for training in arts and technology. His philosophy is that if you treat poor people incredibly well they will respond. He has had a really profound effect around that city and now in other parts of the country.

We are quite analytical when we look at the people who approach us, regarding their plans or their next stage of evolution.