

# Holistic Sustainable Solutions

An Interview with Ann Young Lee, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, CORE



CORE Co-Founder and CEO Ann Lee with staff at a COVID-19 testing site in Los Angeles

**EDITORS' NOTE** Ann Young Lee has 20 years of experience managing large scale humanitarian response and sustainable development programming across a variety of sectors including emergency relief, community upgrading and infrastructure, livelihoods and economic growth, and local governance. Prior to joining CORE, she served as the lead on urban humanitarian response and as the private sector liaison for the Secretary General's World Humanitarian Summit. Previously, she served as Country Director for CHF, where she was responsible for a \$150-million portfolio of projects including emergency shelter, neighborhood planning, construction, debris removal and livelihoods. She has

extensive field-based experience and has lived in Haiti, both before and after the 2010 earthquake; the Philippines, responding to Typhoon Haiyan; Kosovo, working to address the post-war refugee crisis; and the Congo, participating in humanitarian response efforts. Lee is the author of *Livelihoods in Emergencies: A Double-Edged Sword*. She developed a gender-sensitive emergency assessment tool, called the CLARA, while with the Women's Refugee Commission, which is now being used by international organizations around the world. She has presented on crisis response and recovery at leading conferences and high-level meetings, such as the Concordia Summit, the Clinton Global Initiative, the Harvard

Humanitarian Summit, InterAction, and Chain X Change, one of the largest blockchain conferences in the world. Lee holds a master's in urban planning from New York University, and a master's in economics and conflict management from Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). She received the Society for International Development's prestigious Truman Award in May 2009.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** CORE (Community Organized Relief Effort) is a nonprofit organization co-founded by Sean Penn and Ann Lee that is dedicated to saving lives and strengthening communities affected by or vulnerable to crisis. Within hours of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Penn mobilized a powerful network to take immediate action. More than 10 years later, CORE ([coreresponse.org](http://coreresponse.org)) continues to lead sustainable programs focused on four pillars: emergency relief, disaster preparedness, environmental resiliency and community building. The organization has expanded beyond Haiti to support communities in the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and the United States. CORE has taken a leadership position in the COVID-19 response and is committed to an integrated approach, inclusive of expanded testing, community-based contact tracing and quarantine support services. The organization has administered more than 3.5 million tests across dozens of test sites throughout the nation, with a focus on serving low-income groups, communities of color, first responders and essential workers.

**Will you discuss your vision for founding CORE and how you define CORE's mission?**

When I met Sean in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, I was working for one of the biggest U.S. NGOs. Initially I was a skeptic and was cynical of an actor coming in to help, but Sean's vision and outsider perspective proved different. He pushed my understanding of what's possible to achieve in a relief effort and what first responders *should* be doing. Soon, he and I were conspiring against the traditional ways of doing things in one of the biggest disasters of our time, in the most complex and broken country in this hemisphere. He was shoe-stringing innovation and responding to this disaster while building lasting change in the hardest hit, poorest neighborhoods. It was inspiring.

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When I came on board to the organization, then known as J/P HRO, the Haiti earthquake acted as our touchstone. The biggest impact we made in Haiti was centering all humanitarian action through and in support of communities and their social, cultural and physical infrastructure, which in turn strengthens them against the next crisis – be it a natural disaster, economic downturn or otherwise. We listened, we learned, and acted quickly. We engaged the local community to be their own best agents for rebuilding **their** community. That ethos is the foundation to CORE, or Community Organized Relief Effort. When disaster strikes, we mobilize quickly – calling upon our network of dedicated staff, supporters, partners and the community to activate response efforts. We hire locally to build the team that is already responding and further resourcing them allows us to act quickly and strategically to address the immediate damage on the ground, doing whatever it takes to save lives and stabilize the local community.

Our mission encompasses not only the breadth of our work, but lends itself to our nimble and strategic approach in each response – to save lives and strengthen communities affected by or vulnerable to crisis.

**Will you highlight CORE’s holistic approach to its work?**

What sets CORE apart from other nonprofits is that we do not just focus on one problem. We don’t just focus on hunger, shelter or education disparities or environmental issues. We focus on what makes a strong, healthy, and vibrant community and quality of life, even if it means building something better than what was there before. Communities in crisis have many factors that lead to their vulnerability and disproportionate risk of being affected by disaster, all too often being social, economic, exclusion, and social injustice. While addressing immediate needs in a disaster, we also recognize that to do more than Band-Aid a disaster, we need to address the root causes of vulnerability. Focusing on holistic sustainable solutions, we build systems that better prepare communities for crisis and prevent the effects of devastation on the most vulnerable populations. Humanity will always face disasters, particularly as climate change increases the frequency of catastrophic hurricanes and wildfires. As the wealth gap continues to widen globally, the population vulnerable to disaster is as high as it’s ever been, and we see too often that low-income communities of color are the hardest hit.

Our holistic approach has a strong foundation in how we work with the community. We are not saviors, coming to help for the glory and leaving once the initial job appears to be done. We are trusted partners to the community, and that requires close collaboration with community leaders and members to ensure we are addressing their needs. Our staff is sourced within each community we serve. This is a critical piece of the work we do across the board. For any relief effort to effect long-term change, the community must believe in it and be part of it. We have been working in Haiti for more than 10 years and have employed hundreds of Haitians who implement our programs focused on education, reforestation and community development. Throughout the past year during our COVID-19 relief effort, we have applied the same process by hiring local teams for our operations in each city and community.

**Will you provide an overview of CORE’s programs and key areas of focus?**

Our key areas of focus are emergency relief, disaster preparedness, environmental resilience and community mobilization, which are all interconnected. Whether in Haiti after the earthquake or in the immediate aftermath of the many devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean, or today as we provide critical testing and services across the U.S. in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, our first steps are providing lifesaving support (from food, shelter, to medical support) and assessing the damage, and then we can begin the process to build sustainable solutions targeted to each response effort. For example, in the Bahamas, our immediate work on the ground following Hurricane Dorian was focused on addressing the urgent medical needs within the hardest hit communities with support from our partners in San Juan, Puerto Rico and Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz. We moved into debris removal and clearing out flooded homes, and then to our current focus, which is to rebuild and strengthen the damaged homes and infrastructure, and provide grants to small businesses to quickly get back up and running.

Following the initial emergency relief efforts, we try to mitigate the effects of future crises by understanding the vulnerabilities that exist before emergency efforts are needed as part of our disaster preparedness focus. We build systems that equip at-risk communities with the ability to fight back when faced with disaster. In Georgia following Hurricane Florence, we launched a Youth

Preparedness program to ensure that local youth know emergency protocols for hurricanes and flooding, and can provide support to the community from within. We have found that having a teen encourage neighbors to evacuate can be more effective than warnings from local authorities, particularly in communities where trust of government and institutions has eroded.

Thinking long-term, we focus on environmental resilience through agriculture programs, such as Haiti Takes Root. With our partners at the World Bank, the governments of Haiti and France, and the Parker Foundation, Haiti Takes Root has developed a 30-year plan to overcome the environmental and economic consequences of climate change by focusing on reforestation and supporting local farmers using a market-based approach.

At the heart of everything we do is community, and while rebuilding from physical destruction is often one of the first steps, it is also important to implement long-term programs focused on community building. In Haiti, we support one of the largest municipalities in Port au Prince through education, vocational training, community health and economic development programs for women. We founded the School of Hope, which serves kids from the most marginalized communities and is also the first school in Haiti to serve children with disabilities. CORE is also rebuilding The University of Haiti Faculty of Sciences Department, which was funded by the Qatar Haiti Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank.

We also partnered with the government of Qatar to bring Generation Amazing to Haitian kids. Generation Amazing is a youth-centered soccer program that empowers kids around the world to build a better future for themselves and their communities through team building to promote inclusion, reduce vulnerability, and provide life-skills and knowledge to lead healthy and successful futures.

**How is CORE addressing the pandemic and what do you see as the path forward in confronting the next wave of the virus?**

We have applied our holistic perspective to COVID-19 relief, and we are committed to implementing an integrated approach, the CORE 8, which is centered on expanded testing, community-based contact tracing and quarantine support services. The CORE 8 is our guiding approach that outlines four simple steps for governance and four steps for individual citizens that must be taken to protect our communities.

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At the beginning of the pandemic, we, like everyone else, had not encountered a public health crisis of this scale, but we knew the first step was offering as much free testing as possible. We began in Los Angeles with Mayor Garcetti, the City of L.A., LAFD, and our lab partner Curative, and since March 30, CORE has expanded across the country and has administered over 3 million free tests. We expanded our operations to Oakland, Chicago, Greater Atlanta, New Orleans, Washington, D.C. and the Navajo Nation. We charged forward and rapidly expanded to bring free testing to as many people as possible. As we all have seen, testing alone is not the solution. Testing, while a critical and necessary component, is best utilized with the integration of a successful contact tracing program and support services to those who may not have the resources to isolate safely and effectively. As a result, we hired from the community and trained them in contact tracing to provide on the ground, door to door contact tracing in support of Fulton County, GA. Knowing that families often avoid testing and tracing because they run the risk of losing their housing or jobs if tested positive, CORE is also coordinating with Fulton’s Board of Health to provide services to these families to quarantine safely, including rental support, food and mental health services.

**How critical is it for CORE to build strong partnerships with government leaders and the business community in order to be successful in its efforts?**

When we embark on a relief effort, we look to forge partnerships with three fundamental pillars: the public and private sectors, and the communities. These are the entities that are needed for long-lasting change, and to ensure that short-term assistance does not work against long-term recovery. One example of this is in post-earthquake Haiti. Many organizations provided free healthcare and water services. After a year, the local private hospitals and private water businesses could not compete with free services and were shut down, which had long-term consequences and created a new set of problems. As humanitarians, we need to do no harm, and often working with these three pillars and in support of good systems is the best way to avoid doing harm. During our COVID-19 relief effort, the majority of our funding has come from the private sector, particularly Jack Dorsey’s #StartSmall, which provided more

than \$30 million in funding. The public sector is often slow and cannot pivot quickly to adapt to changing realities on the ground in dynamic situations. However, we know that each has a strong role to play in order for recovery to happen in a way that builds something better and stronger in the wake of a crisis.

**Will you discuss the importance of metrics in order to measure the impact of CORE’s work?**

One of our greatest strengths is that we are always striving to learn and do better. It’s very easy to get caught up in numbers and metrics, but we always try to be self-critical to ensure that we have a positive impact on the quality of life of the communities we work with. Though we are the only nonprofit doing this scale of testing, we knew we had to do more and do better. Testing isn’t enough to limit the spread of COVID. As a result, we pulled in partners like Partners in Health who trained us and equipped us to move into contact tracing, as well as supporting families who cannot quarantine safely. Nevertheless, some key data points we have as of November 30 are as follows: we have administered more than 3,500,000 free tests, built more than 100 dwellings in Navajo Nation (with plans for 350 dwellings), distributed more than 30,000 hygiene kits, and knocked on more than 2,000 doors to contact trace and provide support to families.

Metrics are also beneficial to understanding how certain communities are responding to our services and how we can better communicate or tailor our approach. For instance, we learned quickly that contact tracing has a stigma amongst some communities of color, particularly Latinx, and we needed to have local community representatives having these conversations to quell any fear about participating. The messages that resonate are that we want to help keep your family safe and give you the help you need.

The scope of our work is broad, and we want our generous supporters and the general public to know what our small but mighty organization is doing. I often say that we’re not particularly proud of being the nonprofit front-runner of COVID-19 relief because there should be so much more work being done to prevent spread, hospitalizations and deaths. We need every governing body, corporate leadership and NGO to step up and join this relief effort.

**Were you always attracted to nonprofit work and what has made this work so special for you?**

I was always compelled to act against any injustices, even in my youth. I was so pained when my parents, who spoke broken English, would be mistreated and talked to like children. When I was 15 years old, I remember hitting an older male in the face when he was picking on an elderly woman who couldn’t speak English. It’s a burning rage against injustices that has driven me into nonprofit work. When I see poverty, abuse, exploitation, exclusion and unfairness, I know I can do something, and therefore, I must do something. Working as the head of a small organization (prior to our expansion to being a mid-size organization during the pandemic), I myself often responded to disasters and was very much on the front lines. Being on the ground and doing the work is always a good reminder of why this work is so special. I have the honor to work with families and communities, neighborhoods and cities, where the work we do is tangibly improving people’s lives, livelihoods and their environment. That impact to add something better into this world fundamentally sustains me to do this work.

**CORE has made a great impact with its work. Are you able to take moments to celebrate the wins and appreciate what CORE has achieved?**

Every day, I am amazed by what our team of 1,000 staff and volunteers has achieved. When we embarked on our COVID-19 relief effort, similar to our other previous efforts, we did not know the duration and extent of our operations. We have learned and evolved so much over the past 9 months, from jumping to action in Los Angeles in March to activating an integrated approach inclusive of contact tracing and quarantine support services. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and it’s important for team members to have moments of celebration and rest to fuel ourselves for the challenging months ahead.

While I am very proud of our accomplishments and amazed at the resilience of our team, I recognize the gravity of the fact that we are the only nonprofit working on this scale. Our federal government’s response has failed us, and there is so much work to be done. CORE cannot do it alone. We need the government to work collaboratively with its constituents, we need the private sector to contribute, we need other NGOs to activate their networks, and we need every individual citizen to act responsibly and take initiative to protect their communities. ●