Lily Kanter makes money so she can give it away. And she's good at it.

After holding management positions at IBM and Deloitte & Touche, Kanter retired from Microsoft in 2000, a multimillionaire at the age of 35.

With her husband, gem dealer Marc Sarosi, she used $2 million to form a family foundation, and now gets her kicks "supporting amazing causes and amazing social entrepreneurs."

Meanwhile, she also is the CEO of Serena & Lily, a Sausalito-based home decor business that started six years ago with crib bedding and, for the first time this spring, will turn over the lion’s share of its catalog to adult pieces. The products are available at 400 retailers nationwide.

"We're in the pattern, color and style inspiration business," Kanter said.

Giving power to employees

She and partner Serena Dugan, who drives the creative end of the company, also are in the business of "making a difference in the world."

"For us, the ultimate end goal of why we're building a successful company is so that we have the means to be active philanthropically," Kanter said. "The things that really drive me are the ability to grow and empower employees, have them have the ability to be able to afford a house one day in the Bay Area, but also to have the means to be philanthropic."

Many of the company's 30 employees are women, Kanter said, describing the outfit as a "corporate refugee camp" for former executives who are striving to achieve a more balanced work/family life.

Beneath the Pollyanna trappings, Kanter is a savvy, tireless businesswoman who chooses her charities as she would a business deal: by their return on investment.
"Just like most investors will invest in businesses based on leaders in business, I look for leadership in the social sector," she said. "They have to be on the ground really making a change that you can see with your own two eyes. I don't like massive organizations with offices in major cities."

Simply put, the more directly you can deal with a cause, the more bang you get for your buck - especially in some far-flung locales.

"What's really exciting about some of these international opportunities is that a little tiny bit goes a long way," Kanter said, noting that you don't have to be a millionaire to make a difference. Globalgiving.org, for example, will match up volunteers' resources - money, time or donations - with a cause.

Kanter's current focus is on the Cambodian Children's Fund (cambodianchildrensfund.org), created by Scott Neeson, a former president of 20th Century Fox who, like Kanter, wanted to use his success to effect change in the world.

"It's an orphanage that took the poorest of the poor off this rancid dump site. I'm investing in the person running the operation," she said. "There are 515 kids there, and he's absolutely going to transform the lives of these human beings. They were trash pickers - you've never seen anything like it."

'Passion for social action'

Kanter traveled to the orphanage last summer with her 8-year-old son, Max.

"I want to instill some level of passion for the world, a passion for social action," Kanter said, referring to her three sons. "It's hard for them to understand that most of the world doesn't live like we do."

Kanter's own childhood was spent in Kansas City, Mo. Her mother taught second grade at an inner-city school, and her father was a doctor for a free health clinic.

"They were both working in a social action capacity and were tireless volunteers. I think our parents instilled a really serious work ethic," Kanter said of herself and her brother, who is 14 months older. "My father never missed a day of work."

Looking back at her own career, Kanter describes herself as "that employee who would stay till 2 in the morning."
"I can think back on my career and know that I definitely paid my dues. I don't know that you can get successful without working hard," she said. "Sometimes I see the next generation coming out, and it's a different work ethic."

Asked to pinpoint her proudest accomplishment, Kanter concluded it was a work in progress: "Figuring out how to do the dance of running a successful company, but also running a successful household.

"This is one of the biggest challenges women are going to have to overcome in this era," she said. "We don't necessarily have the role models of our mothers who did this. There are days when I still wonder if it's possible."

Lily Kanter

Age: 45

Work: CEO and co-founder, Serena & Lily (privately held)

Family: Husband, Marc Sarosi; sons Max, 8, Zeke, 6, and Nate, 4

Residence: Mill Valley

Quote: "My goal is to be able to give away $1 million a year."

Current philanthropy: Cambodian Children's Fund

Can't live without: Her family, her sense of humor

Hobbies: Tennis, travel, reading, philanthropy

Recommended read: "Half the Sky," by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

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http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/04/11/BUKS1CRQIK.DTL

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