

# Vincent Chin's Good Turn — From Ralph Lauren to Akola Project

**As chief administrative officer, Chin takes on operational responsibility**

By [Evan Clark](#) on May 31, 2017



<img

Brittany Underwood, left, is working to change the lives of women in need with The Akola Project.

Brittany Underwood is bringing in some operational expertise to help take her non-profit jewelry company, The Akola Project, to the next level.

Akola has tapped Vincent Chin — who most recently worked at Ralph Lauren Corp., heading finance and operations for global marketing, advertising and public relations — as chief administrative officer.

He will report to Underwood, founder and chief executive officer, and will assume all operational responsibility for the company, which seeks to empower women in poverty in both Uganda and Dallas by given them good-paying jobs.

The company also hired Lisa Bourne as vice president of e-commerce. Borne will report to Chin and was most recently merchandise manager of global e-commerce and e-commerce operations at Fossil. Before that she worked at Amazon managing a portfolio of more than 100 women's apparel brands.

Chin's arrival next month will free up Underwood to think the big thoughts that got the unusual nonprofit started and has it reexamining each leg of the supply chain and looking to make an impact.

Akola means "she works" in Lusoga, a language spoken in Uganda, where Underwood has partnered with the local community to build infrastructure, including roads, and set up shop. In Uganda, the company employs 409 women, each of whom uses the wages earned to support themselves and, on average, seven kids and three elderly people.

"I know their kids, I know their farms, I know the names of their cows," said Underwood, who seems to be more force of nature than fashion ceo. "I know them and because I know them that drives me to do more. It's not just trying to do good, you're invested in a way that's different. We're putting food on the table. It's life or death."

In Dallas, bracelets, necklaces and other styles are assembled by 40 to 50 women who are identified by local nonprofits and are in need. They are paid by the piece at a rate that equals \$15 an hour, with some earning as much as \$30.

"Most of our cost of goods sold is actually our program cost," Underwood said. "We literally created a business to give back, the whole purpose of it is to meet a social need."

Akola was founded in 2007, but things have really taken off in the last year with a boost from [Neiman Marcus](#) chief executive Karen Katz, who met Underwood 18 months ago and advised her to hit the high end.

"It's not hard to be blown away by what she's doing," Katz said. "She was looking to try to figure out how to do more business and we kind of cooked up this idea of a more elevated product selection for [Neiman Marcus](#)."

Katz introduced Underwood to Guy Bedarida, who [had just left John Hardy after 16 years as creative director](#), and he has been helping Akola hit the mark.

[The brand was introduced in all 42 Neiman Marcus stores](#), a very big platform for a relatively small brand that also has its own e-commerce platform.

“We’ve been in this business for now less than a year,” Katz said. “It’s doing really nicely....The product has to be great. The customer’s not going to buy it if they don’t love the product. In this case, the product is really, really good.

“We as retailers love to develop great new businesses with young companies, but the fact that we can also help put some women to work, it makes such a wonderful compelling story,” she said.