

HELPING HANDS

There's potential for astonishing progress through volunteer initiatives. MiNDFOOD visits eight young people, all under 30, who are leading social projects in Australasia, Asia, the Americas and the Middle East.

Words by **Lee Suckling**



ROLE MODELS
Adam Everill (bottom left) is using sports heroes to help change attitudes about violence in Papua New Guinea.

GOOD SPORTS

Papua New Guinea is the only country in the world with rugby league as its national sport. It is also a nation with one of the highest rates of domestic and sexual abuse in the world. Adam Everill has found a way for the sport to help combat abuse.

Like many university students, Adam Everill discovered activism through exposure to international affairs. While studying at the University of Wollongong, Everill began researching HIV transmission in Papua New Guinea as a project for the university's Amnesty International branch. Taken aback by the strong correlation between transmission and domestic violence, it was during this time that Everill came across an article by Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, exploring how sport could be used as a development vehicle in the Pacific.

"After researching [ambassador-led anti-domestic violence] programmes based mostly in Australia, I found that they could be applied to the Papua New Guinea (PNG) context," says Everill. "Ultimately nobody was doing it, so I did."

Such a discovery led Everill along the path to founding Rugby League Against Violence, a volunteer organisation dedicated to putting strong male spokesmen in Papua New Guinean towns.

"Rugby League Against Violence (RLAV) aims to transform the discourse of 'what it means to be a man' in Papua New Guinean communities," Everill explains. "Being a man means respecting, not abusing, your partner and children, and standing up for ideals of non-violence. In a country where national heroes are those who score tries, take brutal hit-ups, and make tackles for a living, seeing such respected players as [PNG nationals] Neville Costigan [Newcastle Knights] and James Segeyaro [Penrith Panthers] advocating non-violent forms of masculinity empowers men to do the same. It empowers them to be champions of their own communities."

Launched in Morata, Port Moresby, RLAV is still in its early stages, but it is already making an impact as its ambassadors speak up to raise awareness. Its model recognises that behavioural change is a hard-fought battle, so a multi-faceted approach employing a social marketing campaign, mixed games of rugby league tag and community engagement workshops (led by positive male role models) aims at educating PNG nationals about alternatives to violence.

"RLAV has integrated mixed-league tag matches with a code of conduct that adds disincentives for violence in the community," says Everill. "Similarly, player workshops aim to educate community members and promote respectful relations. Titi Gabi, a PNG expert and activist on violence in the country, recently cited the RLAV as one of the only 'positive development[s] in a gloomy situation.'"

GOOD PRACTICE
Helping people in need is great experience for medical students, as well as giving something back.



MEDICAL MARVEL

Pre-med student Aaron D. Marshall has been using his knowledge all over the Americas to help those in need. Now he is getting other university students involved in the initiative.

During his first year at Western Carolina University – studying pre-medicine athletic training – Aaron D. Marshall decided on Guatemala for his spring break destination. But Marshall's experience wasn't exactly something out of a *National Lampoon's Vacation* movie.

"I put my hand up for some disaster relief while in Guatemala and fell in love with the nation's young children, many of whom had a slew of medical problems," says Marshall, who found himself wanting to return to Central America to provide thorough medical care while he continued his undergraduate degree. "I surmised an opportunity to start a non-profit organisation for just that purpose: to provide college students with medical experiences in the developing world."

And so Student-Humanitarian-Activist began. Founded to help students embrace volunteerism by providing aid, the project pulled together a handful of students and readied them to venture to Central America. As planning got underway, disaster struck closer to home and the services of Student-Humanitarian-Activist were needed immediately. "In late October 2012 Hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast of the US," Marshall recalls. "Just after it rolled into New York, I found my Facebook and Twitter inboxes being flooded with messages about assisting. I coordinated with multiple organisations in need, and provided college students with little or no medical experience to care for affected homeowners."

Five students spent the weeks over Christmas 2012 in the homes of hurricane-stuck New Yorkers in need of basic medical care. "It's all about acts of kindness and inspiration," says Marshall. "Life is about acts ... something comes from within us. It's a calling; it's motivation."

Unity comes from travelling to help others, Marshall explains, referencing Student-Humanitarian-Activist's hurricane relief work in other parts of America's east coast. "My time in places like Atlanta was spent involving spontaneous volunteers in the disaster relief process."

Student-Humanitarian-Activist ventured to Pacux, a town west of Rabinal in Guatemala, in March and April 2013. It was the organisation's first official "mission trip" where the students assisted with dentistry and immunisation.

"I'm taking those who need help and combining those who can help. Somehow, all of this is taking place while I'm still in my undergraduate pre-medical education," Marshall says.

SHAKING IT UP



When disaster strikes in the developing world, government access to remote locations is difficult and relief often limited. Pakistan's Qasim Aslam saw a way to help.

Initial reports estimated only several hundred casualties after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake. But to Aslam and his fellow classmates at Pakistan's Lahore University of Management Sciences, it was clear that the natural disaster's effects would be far wider reaching than officials estimated.

"The government's access to remote areas, especially deep into the mountains where the locals are predominantly self-subsistent, was abysmal," says Aslam, noting the actual earthquake death count was later confirmed at more than 70,000.

He and his classmates devised a simple online tool that would centralise relief efforts by recording them through geo-tagging and info-recording and Relief Information System for Earthquake in Pakistan (RISEPAK) was created.

Through RISEPAK, geo-tagging recorded the demographics of settlements as they were discovered and the system categorised aid goods that could be delivered.

"This would enable all players to know where the establishments were, how needy they were ... and would also help plan daily expeditions accordingly," says Aslam. "In contributing through expertise, we put our minds together and came up with something to help."

HOME HELP

Dang Huynh Mai Anh (left) has helped her community become eco-smarter.



GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

What began as a handbook on household management for Dang Huynh Mai Anh's neighbours has become an influential project that has seen thousands of copies distributed to Vietnamese housewives.

Environmental projects in Vietnam are largely directed towards children and students, but Dang Huynh Mai Anh, a student at the Ho Chi Minh City Foreign Trade University, saw a way to inform their mothers of the benefits of going green.

"I'm connecting young people and their mums while protecting the environment," says Mai Anh of *Green Handbook for Housewives*, her manual which instructs housewives on how to do their housework "smarter and with the environment in mind".

The project began in April 2012 when Mai Anh embarked on a survey of 200 Ho Chi Minh City housewives, with support from the Bayer Young Environmental Envoy Program, concerning their knowledge of household waste, water use and other facets of home eco-awareness. With her survey results, Mai Anh began devising environmentally sensitive alternatives to housework, from flower-watering to washing up. She then designed, printed and distributed a handbook to housewives all over Vietnam.

To date, more than 5000 copies have been printed and even Mai Anh's sceptics have taken her advice on board. "When designing the handbook, I went over [to] my neighbour's house and asked for some info for the survey. An elderly woman, she didn't want to cooperate and didn't believe the project would be successful.

"But when I finished my handbook, I put a copy under her door. One morning, I woke up and looked out the window to the opposite house, where my neighbour was watering flowers. She had reused a beverage bottle with holes made on the cap, as instructed in my handbook."

Most people think about volunteering as purely for the benefit of society at large. Mai Anh has a different take. "I want to think that I do volunteering firstly for myself," she says.

"Rather than be a 'hero', I volunteered my time on this project because I love designing, publishing and just simply making something for other people to read. I enjoy the moment that my neighbour takes my handbook in her hands and I know I've done something meaningful in my life." Volunteering is a hobby for people like Mai Anh. "Some people love photography and others love video games," she says. "I love volunteering my time." ▶

FLOWER POWER



Social enterprises apply commercial attitudes to projects that maximise human wellbeing and quality of life, rather than yield profits. In Indonesia, such a strategy is being used to give new life to communities of women.

Empowering women rose-growers has become modus operandi for Nadya Saib (pictured above). A 26-year-old pharmacist from Indonesia, in 2010 she found herself developing a formula for personal care products in Jakarta and began to regularly deal with the rose industry.

"Roses are economic commodities with high economic value," says Saib. Despite this, rose farmers live month-to-month in dire conditions as they struggle to sell roses deemed unfit for exporting.

After undertaking a study on natural soap ingredients with two friends, Saib volunteered her time to create a social business called Wangsa Jelita (the beautiful dynasty), which teaches the women in farming communities to make natural soaps out of flowers that would otherwise go to waste. "We started as a small group of women and now we're empowering other women," Saib says. "The goal is to give each community the skills to run its own social enterprise in the future."

"Through this project, women rose farmers will have alternative markets for their roses and they'll also have more bargaining power."

In 2012, Saib received the prestigious ASEAN Youth Award.



GATHERING THE TROOPS
Sam Johnson's Volunteer Army helped many in need after the Christchurch earthquakes.

CHANGING THE MINDSET

Sam Johnson has spent the better part of three years getting young people involved in volunteering. What began as a student club on Facebook has since influenced 27,000 young Kiwis to help in their communities.

Twenty-nine volunteers. That's how many people from the University of Canterbury had joined Sam Johnson's Facebook group, the Student Volunteer Army, when Christchurch's first earthquake hit the city on September 4, 2010.

Within two weeks, 2500 students had involved themselves in clean-up, food distribution and other support in earthquake-hit areas. "The Facebook club was the key tool in the Volunteer Army's success," says Johnson, now 24. "It was a way to make volunteering sexy, fun and simple. Most importantly, it encouraged volunteering without long-term commitment. It enabled people to show up on the day, when they felt like it, and help out."

The Volunteer Army's momentum built up exponentially and on February 22, 2011 when the 6.3 magnitude earthquake hit Christchurch, 27,000 people were ready to dig through disastrous cement-like liquefaction and help those in need. "Helping people isn't actually what the Volunteer Army is all about," Johnson says. "It's about the mental and physical development of young people and we happen to do that through volunteering. In essence, it's about giving young people opportunities to grow themselves."

Johnson established the Volunteer Army Foundation in October 2011 with the core purpose of facilitating student-led projects. "The mission is to give people the support and promotional tools to start their own volunteer efforts," Johnson says, noting more than 1000 have since taken place with the Foundation's help. "The biggest project was The Concert, New Zealand's first entirely volunteer-run concert." The only way to get a ticket to The Concert, a 10-hour musical festival featuring New Zealand's most prolific music acts, was to volunteer four hours of time (or pre-pledge it) to one of 900 projects listed on The Concert's website. "The result was 50,000 hours being put into such projects by 8000 volunteers," says Johnson.

Johnson, who was named Young New Zealander of the Year in 2012 among a slew of other accolades, is attempting to sow the seeds of a volunteer ethos in his city.

"Volunteering builds a society based on trust," he says. "If we trust each other in Christchurch, the rebuild is going to go a lot smoother."

PLANTING AN IDEA



Anoka Abeyrathne never quite imagined her volunteer work with trees would see her recognised by Queen Elizabeth II. The 22-year-old Sri Lankan, who was awarded a Commonwealth Youth Award by the monarch herself in March 2013, conceptualised and implemented a volunteer project to address climate change by replanting mangroves.

The mangrove tree is known as a secret weapon in climate change mitigation. The trees offer "free services" that alleviate the effects of extreme weather – from coastal stabilisation to filtration of sediments – and are being replanted in various countries to literally grow money for communities.

"When I started out my project, I didn't think of it as volunteering," Abeyrathne says. "I did it because I loved the environment."

To Abeyrathne, volunteering is the "lifeblood of a society" with volunteers as "the oxygen carrying red blood cells, keeping the system running in the best way possible".

"Volunteering gives you the opportunity to be part of something greater by contributing a small amount of your time, because you and your efforts matter in making your community, your town and your country a better place – not just for people, but the environment," she says.

With just five volunteers, Abeyrathne's project began in

Bolgoda Lake, Sri Lanka, and has since expanded to India and Bangladesh (and it's soon to be replicated in Pakistan and the Maldives). To date, more than 12,000 mangroves have been replanted from saplings created by mangrove seedling varieties. Such replanting has generated a social enterprise, Growin' Money, which "allows the trees to be used for income-generating activities such as organic juice-making, mask-making and handmade craft-making", Abeyrathne explains. "Growin' Money has led to more than 20,000 underprivileged youth and women [benefitting]," she says.

"When we first started out ... the community near Bolgoda were amused by us, thinking we would get bored of it. As we continued and they realised they could actually save the environment while sustaining a source of income, they really started to get on board and help out."

More than 200 volunteers have joined Abeyrathne in her efforts so far. "Although I don't get paid monetarily for what I do, I've had the best experiences of my life working with my team as part of British Council Climate Champions and Global Changemakers, as well as the World Economic Forum Global Shapers [and others]," she says.

"This wealth of knowledge, work ethic, team spirit and time management has shaped me to become who I am today ... and it's all because of volunteering. That is not something money could ever buy."

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KEYWORD: TRAINWORKS



PULLING HIS WEIGHT
Will Falcão (far right) is driven to help Brazilian youths face their country's gender-based issues.

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

Will Falcão's propensity for volunteer work started at nine years old. His mission now is to create conversations that encourage action about gender inequality and discrimination in Brazil.

"Volunteerism is a passion that began when I was nine years old," says Will Falcão, now 21, who was a dancer early in his life. "I created a project in my community [in Manaus, northern Brazil] that provided opportunities for kids from underprivileged backgrounds to take dance classes for free."

As working with other young people became a passion, Falcão decided he wanted to start conversations with them about Brazilian gender inequalities and discrimination. This inspired React & Change, an organised youth initiative to facilitate change through such a dialogue.

"The mission of React & Change is to activate a youth movement to tackle gender inequality – and its results of bullying, violence and unemployment – and furthermore, youth apathy," says Falcão. "It mobilises the Brazilian young people to strengthen their social projects in the community."

Driven by an online resource, React & Change organises workshops, activities and events throughout Brazil to pool youths together and inspire them to face their country's gender-based problems head-on.

"We seek to equip potential leaders with skills such as social entrepreneurship and advocacy, via urban arts and empowering programmes," says Falcão. "Our aim is to inspire, integrate and capacitate youths. This develops their potential to 'react and change' together."

With this goal, React & Change programmes are diverse – from workshops and speeches to projects fair and group debates. "Through these channels, we awaken a passion about social issues in young people."

In April 2013, React & Change hosted its second Youth for Empowerment Forum with 30 activists in attendance. "During the forum, the React & Change team, alongside selected guest speakers, helped the participants to identify and understand the issues facing their communities or regions and then provided them with training and tools to create initiatives tailored by their discussions," says Falcão.

"We're creating a national community of young leaders and activists, and these people are a fundamental tool to build long-term improvements; eventually influencing government alongside national and local enterprises and organisations." Helping others is a challenge, but "in the end it's very rewarding", Falcão says. "Volunteering means the abdication of your own desire in favour of a collective good and getting out of your comfort zone."