

Ed Gold: Do it yourself charity

Nadeeja Koralage meets Ed Gold, whose year out of medicine turned the self confessed hedonist into the president of an organisation that brings rural development to the poorest communities in Ecuador and Ghana

A graduate from Leeds University in 2000, Ed Gold decided to take a year out of medicine after registering. "I had put my CV on the internet, saying 'I am enthusiastic but have limited skills as a house officer.' I wanted to work somewhere geographically beautiful and make a difference to the community I was working in. Then one day, I got this 3000 word email from Martin Eckhardt, a German medical student. This motivated young man had worked with rural communities in Ecuador. On finding minimal government help for the people, he had vowed to come back and build them a health centre."

"The locals thought he was mad, but he had managed to raise \$20 000 [£11 000; €16 000] in that year. He said he was now desperate for a doctor, and asked me if I wanted to come to Ecuador."

Ecuador

So Ed flew to Ecuador two weeks later. "I'd only received two emails from this guy, spoke no Spanish, and couldn't point to Ecuador on the map," before being picked up at Quito airport. After meeting up "we talked and talked, and discovered we were driven by the same ideals about development work."

Sick people from the region (where the clinic was planned) were walking for up to 12 hours on muddy forest tracks, before paying for a truck to take them out of the forest to get medical attention. The nearest health centre was reached by a "treacherous and virtually impassable road that turned to a quagmire in the rainy season."

The two men formalised their ideas and set up the organisation called foundation human nature. In 2001, the foundation built a community centre for the 31 communities of the region, which was initially staffed by a series of volunteer doctors from Europe; however, this turned out to be unsustainable.

Four and a half years on, the government in Ecuador funds a doctor, a dentist, a nurse, cheap medicines, and so on for the clinic. Other projects include fresh water provision, impregnated nets, vaccinations, and training of local people in relevant health issues (health promoters)—a far more sustainable outlook.

Ghana

The story in Ghana is somewhat different. "A German missionary had built a clinic in her late husband's memory and had been funding it from abroad. She contacted us when the church ministers who were trusted to look after it wanted the money paid into their 'personal accounts.' It turned out that they had been taking the money all along. A total of \$65 000 had been donated in the past 10 years, and the church had stolen virtually every cent."

When he arrived in Ghana in 2003 Ed found the clinic without staff and in urgent need of repair, with equipment and the ambulance missing. "The generator and ambulance we bought were being used for church meetings. It was unbelievable. So we had to resurrect the centre, find staff, 'repossess' our equipment, and raise money." Having intended to go for two weeks, he ended up staying for six months.

The health centre now provides for 7000 people and includes full health services and a laboratory, and it is establishing the projects and successes of its Ecuadorian counterpart. It is also equipped with an ambulance for emergency transfers.

Ed found the work in Ghana difficult: "As the only white/affluent person amongst thousands of locals, understandably everyone wanted 'something' from me: a simple conversation, money, help with a visa, or to make a joke at you. You soon learn you are a long way from home and to be humble."

He managed to get time alone by playing the drums: "If you play music in Africa, people respect your time. If I hadn't done something for myself, something to lose myself in, I'd have gone mad."

Regrets

Spending long periods in Ecuador or Ghana is isolating. "You come back and meet up with your friends/family after being immersed in another culture for many months and working alone in extreme conditions. It's really hard to re-integrate yourself." He stops and thinks, before adding: "One regret about my long times abroad is that it's very difficult to maintain partners and keep close relationships with friends and family."

Returning from Australia

Still active as president of foundation human nature, Ed makes regular visits to Ghana and Ecuador to oversee the projects. He will return from Australia in two months to St Mary's emergency department. "You can't be naïve, you have to have money, and a career path, but also follow your heart. We qualify so young in the UK that you have time to pursue more altruistic paths."

CV impact

Ed has received mixed responses from employers. "Some people will say: 'Why should we give you the job, when you've been sunning yourself in Ecuador, and Joe Bloggs has been working diligently in the NHS?' But others will look closely and see what you've achieved with your time."

"It's the best thing in my life, friends and family aside. This experience reminded me of why I wanted to do medicine. It's constructive, sustainable aid to motivated communities. I hope this article will encourage others to do the same."

For more information about foundation human nature, or to make a donation, please visit www.f-h-n.org or email Ed at e.gold@f-h-n.org



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