

The unexpected benefits of philanthropy¹

Or why saving the World is more exciting than buying shoes

text and photography

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Philanthropy is not throwing a bunch of spare coins into a beggar's heat – that's a charitable gesture without any long term consequences, a ticket out of a guilt trip. Philanthropy is the conscious effort you make to financially support a cause that you are truly passionate about. There are plenty of causes out there – cancer research, greener planet, saving endangered species, helping war refugees – whatever rocks your boat.

For the past ten years I went from a broke, sleep deprived student, through over worked finance associate on the brink of nervous break down to a well paid professional with a decent life-work balance. I was so focused on my career that I haven't noticed the change - the closer I was getting to my financial goals, the less important they seemed. I woke up one Sunday morning and realized that financial success alone will not make me happy. Not that I was unhappy, it just didn't feel exiting anymore. Even the usual shopping therapy wasn't working. It was time to change something.

I changed my hairstyle, I changed my job, I even changed the country, but things in many respects remained the same. On top of it, there was the rising guilt in the back of my mind for spending my hard earned cash on clothes, swanky restaurant dinners and exotic travel, while witnessing the poverty in many of the countries I was visiting. Sitting at the beach at Copa Cabana, it was very difficult to ignore the kids that rush to collect my beer can as soon as I empty it, so they can make 1/20 of a \$1 on it. Even more difficult was putting up with the sight of the "fellow" travelers in Habana, that were bluntly exploring the "sex trail". Something deep inside me just didn't want to accept this state of affairs. What should I do? Give up everything, become a rebel and stage a world revolution? Huh, let's be realistic. This is when the concept of philanthropy comes in.

I happened to be passionate about two things – education and women rights. Call me a lipstick feminist if you want. I'm not burning my bra on the main square, but I'm not oblivious to the fact that even in the most advanced society's women are still having it a little tougher. In the rest of the world, women are having it a lot tougher. Over ¾ of all illiterate adults in the world are female. What do I have to do with it? I am a highly educated, well off female that lives in the developed world. I have a choice – ignore the fact (and go shoe shopping) or try to change it.

Few months ago I came across a book that was written by a guy by the name of John Wood. Long story short, one day John quit his high flying job at Microsoft and started Room to Read, a non-profit organization that builds schools and libraries, and provides long term scholarships to girls in Southeast Asia, India and Nepal. Why girls? Because when family budget gets tight, the girls are the first one to drop out of school and be send to work, married off or even pushed into prostitution. You don't believe it? Take a walk down Maria Luisa Boulevard² in the wee hours and ask the girls when they dropped out from school. Before you start getting judgmental, ask yourself if you would have done better if on your 12th birthday your father told you that money are tight and you have to start helping the family.

¹ The article was originally published in Capital, a Bulgarian newspaper for Economic and Political. Analysis www.capital.bg

² A well know red-light district in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Room to Read is not about handing out cash to poor people to spend. It is about helping the children that were born to poor parents break out of the cycle of poverty through the benefits of education. Mind you, it is not the beggar that spends his days asking for a change that moves me. It is the child in Rio that works a whole day to make \$1.

Room to Read is a very result driven, no non-sense organization. When I emailed their office in London, the reply came within hours and the country director met me over a “cup of tea” the day after she flew back from Laos. Room to Read is open to anyone that wants to raise

money for the organization. The idea is that the combined effort of many people would always yield to better results. You may not have enough money to build a whole school or support a child through 10 years of schooling (and it only takes \$250 per year) but you and your friends may manage together. Well, my friends and I have raised enough to send 10 girls to school this year. That means 10 girls that would have been staying at home this year are continuing their education. That means 10 girls, 10 human beings are being given a better chance in life, because of the few emails that I've sent. Trust me, the satisfaction of having achieved that is much, much greater than buying any kind of shoes. Even boots!



There is no comparison to walking into a room with 100 little girls with radiant faces that stand up and say Namaste (Hello). They would not be there, without the financial help of philanthropists from around the World.

The satisfaction of meeting some of the children that are benefiting from the program is even greater. On a recent trip in Nepal I paid Room to Read's office a visit. So many good charitable ideas go down the drain when you get to the local level. The cash gets lost in someone's account, only a tiny portion goes to the people in need, etc, etc. I wanted to make sure that my friends' hard earned cash is spent as promised.

Ms. Reema Shrestha is the head of the girls' scholarships program and a very impressive woman. Room to Read currently has 764 scholars in Nepal, so Reema is one very busy lady. She told me that the most difficult part of her job is selecting who gets the scholarship and who doesn't. There are many girls competing for every scholarship. Reema narrows down the candidates to two per scholarship based on a questionnaire that she's developed. The last step is home visit. The most important criteria is need. At the end of the day, it is very difficult to say who needs it most. Room to Read only helps children that live above the poverty line. There are people that live below the poverty line in Nepal, and the first priority for those children is food. To be honest, I can't quite imagine how the children below the poverty line live, considering what I've witnessed at the home visits. Bulgaria went through a tough transition, and life in Bulgaria is still not easy, but the level of poverty I've seen in other parts of the world is light years away.

Reema took me to a site visit in the Baktapur region, about an hour drive from Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Room to Read is focused on helping the underprivileged rural communities, so all projects are outside of the more developed capital. We went to a school that has 104 Room to Read scholars and visited the homes of three of the girls afterwards. We also visited couple of schools that were built with the help of the organization. Room to Read is well known and respected, and the reception we received was reassuring. The scholars are absolutely adorable. I can not explain the feeling of walking into a room with 100

little girls with radiant faces and neat school uniforms that stand up and say Namaste (Hello). It is absolute cuteness. The truth is, they would not be there, without the financial help of charitable people, many of which live at the other end of the world and probably will never visit Nepal.

Seeing the benefits of my charity work had booster effect on my enthusiasm. I don't want to stop here, I want to raise enough cash for at least 100 girls to go back to school. Why hundred? It's a nice round number and you have to start somewhere. And once you start, you never want to stop, because saving the world is far more exciting than buying shoes.



Asmita Guatam is 9 year old first grader. She lives with her grand mother. Her parents are in Kathmandu, selling fruit at the market. They can not afford to take little Asmita with them.



Asmita wants to become a doctor. I asked her if she didn't prefer to become an actress. She said – "absolutely not". Her life is far from glamorous and her aspirations certainly reflect that.



There was nobody home, so we didn't go in. Asmita's grandmother was expecting us the day before. Room to Read is well known and respected by the local community, and the reception we received everywhere was reassuring.

More about Room to Read: www.roomtoread.org