Children are our Future

Children are Gulf 4 Good, a Dubai-based charity, has been organizing physically demanding expeditions for a good cause since 2002. Next month a group of volunteers will be cycling along the Mekong River raising funds for a school in Laos. The Last Shangri-La was the final of G4CS four annual challenges in 2013, organised to inspire people to challenge themselves while raising funds for vulnerable children.

The 30 children sat cross-legged on the worn carpet, blaring the classroom’s hard and cold stone slab floor. The wooden-framed windows stood slightly open, their peeling paint fluttering in the cool morning breeze, while colourful hand-drawn pictures hanging in the room lifted slightly in the winter wind.

Inside the room, the children sat attentively, listening to the voice reading a story out loud. They didn’t know the two strangers at the front of the classroom but they seemed very entertaining. The grey-haired Englishman laughed as he read out the funny parts of the story and acted out the adventurous ones, diving to the floor as the protagonist might. The Indian man next to him translated the story into Hindi so the children in this remote school tucked away in the Hardwar district of Uttarakhand could understand their visitors’ tale.

Richard Lawson and Jay Daga were not school teachers, but on this particular November morning they were welcomed as such, for alongside five other Gulf 4 Good (G4G) challengers they had come to help build libraries and provide books for the children of this Indian state.

“We visited the Rajkiya Prathamik Vidyalaya school towards the end of the six-day challenge,” says challenger and G4G governor Jay. “The core purpose of the trip was to provide schools in the region with books and libraries [in collaboration with Room to Read]. We spent the whole day at the school with the children, we picked up the books and my co-challenger Richard and I combined skills to read out loud while he also played out the roles to make the kids happy.

“They were smiling all day; it was such an amazing atmosphere we really didn’t want to leave.”

The group of six people of four different nationalities between the ages of 18 and 64 had travelled to the...
Himalayan foothills to participate in the G4G Last Shangri-La Challenge. The six-day trip would see them hiking, rafting and mountain biking through vast and isolated valleys to fundraise for the G4G chosen recipient, charity Room to Read, a global literacy organisation with a local project to build 100 school libraries for Uttarakhand’s poverty-stricken schools.

“The infrastructure of the area came as a shock to us all,” says Jay. “How difficult it is for the kids to get to school, the lack of access to materials, the fact they have so few books. In fact it is a disgrace to call it a school; it was just two classrooms for around 85 children. In one room they had grades one to three. In the other four to six, I can’t imagine how the teacher monitors their progress. Our aim was to raise money so these kids could have books and develop the habit of reading.”

The team fulfilled that aim, completing the physically demanding challenge and raising over £85,000 for the organisation, enough to cover the cost of building the district’s first 10 school libraries and stocking them with between 1,000 and 3,000 local language and English books.

games, puzzles and posters. The Last Shangri-La was the final of G4G’s four annual challenges in 2013, organised to inspire people to challenge themselves while raising funds for vulnerable children.

**Giving back to society**

So why do people set themselves the G4G challenge? “I think people get involved for a variety of reasons,” says Jay. “First and foremost it’s because the core of the challenge is to give for a good cause. You’re giving back to society at the same time as meeting really interesting people with a common motive to explore the world and see it through very different eyes, all the while helping others.”

This was the cornerstone for the founding of G4G in March 2001 by Paul Oliver and today’s Chairman Brian Wilkie.

“It started because Brian and Paul did a charity cycle through Cuba to raise money for blind dogs in the UK,” explains eight-year-old board member Tricia Evans. “Those kinds of enthusiasm of participants has raised over £1.7 million. Money has been put towards building schools, hospitals and orphanages in more than 23 countries in the Middle East, Asia, South America and Africa.

“We've refined our approach over the years,” says Tricia. “We started building a hospital in Nepal, giving dental equipment that would be accessible for all to the Palestinian Children’s Relief Fund, but now we always raise money for kids. Our tagline is Giving Kids a Chance. We have built hundreds of schools and orphanages, built homes for street kids, and provided housing for so children can stay there during the week if they live many miles from school.”

Asked why their focus has shifted solely towards helping the world’s underprivileged children, Tricia explains, “We think that we can have the most direct impact through aiding children – it’s a leverage point. We believe we can have more direct results by building a school and enabling kids to be educated past the age of 10 in the whole village - that’s an instant, quantifiable impact.”

G4G’s efforts have noticeably also begun to centre not only on helping children but specifically girls’ education. They, alongside organisations such as Morocco-based Education for All, which builds ‘home away from home’ boarding houses to ensure girls from remote villages in the Atlas Mountains may continue their secondary education, believe that educating a girl can educate a community.

“There is a lot of evidence and research to support this,” says Tricia, and we have seen it with our own
eyes. If you educate a girl past the age of 12 you shift the cycle of poverty. If she is educated then she will marry later – in the countries in which we operate as soon as a girl reaches puberty they are married off. She will marry more wisely and she will educate her children.”

With a policy in place to not simply hand out money, however, choosing the right charity that will use the funds wisely is an imperative part of the C4C process. “We are very clear that we don’t put money into a black hole,” says Tricia. “The charities have to come up with a proposal, which means they have to be reasonably well organised to receive our support.

“Unfortunately, with the best will in the world many charities across the globe are not well run and so the money would just disappear and we would not see any results. We have raised big sums of money, we’re talking easily Dh500,000 plus.”

**Challenge matches charity**

The C4C expeditions are tailored to raise as much money as possible for local charities and consequently the price tags are not small. Registration fees and sponsorship requirements are dependant on the challenge and vary according to the location and type of event but all participants and accommodation and two-thirds direct to a charity in the region.

Steered by seven board members who all bring different areas of expertise to the table, the organisation is geared specifically at creating four annual challenges of varying levels of difficulty. One board member is assigned to select challenge locations, while another will then focus solely on choosing a local worthwhile charity to support.

Next month the C4C challenges, including Jay Daga, will be going on the Mighty Mekong Challenge, which will see participants embark on a 50km cycle along the Mekong River to raise money for a school in Laos.

“India was my first challenge,” says Jay. “But since seeing first-hand to raise money for local charity Child’s Dream, which will use the funds to build five classrooms at the Nong Pham Secondary School in the country’s Champassak District, a school that serves more than 500 pupils but is termite-infested and threatening to collapse.

“At the moment the school is open to the elements,” says Tricia. “We will be constructing the building, the washrooms and providing furniture, but the villagers are providing the wood and the government is then paying the teachers’ salaries.

“It’s important that we try to ingrain what we do so it’s not just a bunch of people from outside dumping money and disappearing.”

A methodology of sustainability lies at the very heart of the organisation and sees it ensure that the charities it works with involve the local people from the very beginning of a project. It is well documented that participation at a local level can lead to acceptance and consequently more successful solutions within communities.

“We very much believe in the saying, ‘Don’t just give people a fish, teach them how to fish’,” Tricia says. “Sustainability is extremely important and getting the community involved really ensures that. In Peru last year, for example, the fathers of the
teenage girls were making the bricks for their boarding home.

Connection with the communities for participants is also a key aspect of the G4G approach, which ensures that over the course of the challenge, a full day is spent with the community they intend to help.

“If you don’t touch and see the community, you might as well just write a cheque and send it to the charity,” says Jay.

“What we do is a totally different thing. The experience of seeing the impact you are having leaves a really big impression.”

He adds, “When I saw the kids on the challenge in India I compared them to my own kids and it was such a contrast yet somehow they seemed happier. It made me realise that perhaps we tend to give too much to our children.

“I mean, I asked one little boy if he wanted to play cricket and he ran home and after 10 minutes he reappeared with a makeshift piece of wood that was fashioned into a bat. He was so enthusiastic and so happy. It was a very poignant moment.”

Such moments that have the capacity to change lives and transform the way in which many people in more fortunate circumstances view the world, are

at the heart of G4G challenges. However, as Trisha explains, this can at times prove to be a difficult experience for some.

“Sometimes for people, especially if they have never been exposed to such poverty before, it is a heart-breaking experience. In China we raised funds for the Bethel Foundation, a charity helping children with visual impairments. The day we spent there with all these beautiful children was so powerful, it just rips your heart out.

“But the effects these challenges have are often far reaching. For example, one of the women on the China Challenge was a sports teacher and we were supplying money to build a huge hydrotherapy pool and she went back the following year to spend time working there.”

**Just the start of the journey**

Such voluntary acts from G4G participants are not rare and the organisation sees itself very much as a catalyst for further change and a link between the developed and developing world.

Thanks to the continuing support from previous and current challengers, many communities continue to benefit long after the challenge has taken place.

“Villages have been supplied with second-hand uniforms from schools in Dubai, furniture has been shipped out from schools across Dubai, there are people who go back and carry out voluntary work. There are so many wonderful links; people who sponsor children or people who choose to visit the charities again.”

From the many testimonials on the G4G website it is clear to see the challenges are often life changing in the way that participants view the world but also have an indirect impact on the way in which people continue to take their lives forward.

They are not easy expeditions and while they are not a race, challengers will find themselves pushed to their physical limits.

“This isn’t a little walk around Safa Park,” says Trisha. “It’s being on a saddle for eight to nine hours a day, six days on the trot. Anyone could do one day of a G4G challenge but you have to be fit and you need to have stamina. The challenge is doing it for one day then sleeping in a little boarding house and getting up the next day and doing it all over again for six days in a row.”

And it’s a challenge that can have an on-going impact on the lives of those who undertake it. “Jay joined us about six months ago and he has really lost weight,” says Trisha, smiling. “He is so fit now, it has really changed his life.”

Jay says of his transformation, “I was a lot more shy before the Uttarakhand challenge. I would always pick a safe holiday where everything was organised right from airport transfer to where we would visit, where we would eat. Suddenly I found myself sharing a tent with someone I had never met before, and sharing a bathroom.”

He adds, laughing, “My background is in finance so you can imagine how adventurous I used to be. Now all my friends think I’ve gone mad!”

On a more serious note he says, “I honestly think these challenges can change the lives of the challengers just as much as that of the kids.”

Trisha puts it succinctly, “The overall thing that comes out of this is that we know we make a difference in thousands of children’s lives. We know we have shifted the cycle of poverty for the next generation for so many people.”