

The Outpost Global Volunteer Guide 2009: The Heroes

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The Global Volunteer Guide is a three part series on the individuals, institutions and inventions making a difference—and the trips you can take to affect change. From Outpost issue 67. In part one, we profile the heroes.

Kevin Barlow

Nursing the wounded in Sudan

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. That could be Kevin Barlow's personal mantra. After a call to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) told him he was too inexperienced to be an overseas volunteer, he decided to get some—right here in Canada. A paramedic who was enrolled in nursing school (first at St. Lawrence College in Kingston, Ont.; then at McMaster University in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program), Barlow, now 33, spent his summers working in communities like Attawapiskat in the remote north of Ontario. His first mission with MSF, in 2005, was at a health-care facility in Bangladesh. He treated patients at a mobile clinic and trekked through jungle to provide malaria treatment to people living in remote areas.



But it was the five months he spent in Darfur, Sudan—where a civil war has caused hundreds of thousands of casualties—that was life-altering for Barlow. Bearing witness to government-backed militias targeting unarmed Sudanese civilians, Barlow was stationed at an MSF clinic in Seleia in October 2007. For three months, he toiled tirelessly to provide much-needed medical services, train local Sudanese staff and implement a minor surgical service at the clinic. (MSF says it did about 1,500 consultations a month.) People were getting shot, he says, and “being treated with antibiotics, instead of surgery.”

Then, one night in December, fighting broke out on the outskirts of Seleia. A short time later the MSF staff was evacuated. When Barlow returned to the village in late February he was shocked by what he saw; there were only a few thousand inhabitants left (people too young, old or infirm to flee) and the village was burnt and ransacked. “The strong, vibrant community was a pile of ashes.” He was only allowed to stay for a few days at a time, and though the clinic was in shambles he offered any services he could, sleeping on the ground to stay close to his patients.

Barlow now has sage advice for other volunteers: To survive you must understand the limits of what can be done. “Don't do it for the heartwarming moments or you'll get your heart broken,” he says. Instead, do it to learn from people who fight to endure each day, or to give a voice to those who need it. “I want people to know their suffering is not

unheard, that they're not abandoned."

Dr. Tarek Razek Surgical Response in the Sudan

Travelling, says Dr. Tarek Razek, had a significant impact on his decision to become a doctor. As a boy, he often went to Egypt to visit extended family, and even then found the disparities between the First and Third Worlds shocking. "It sort of grabbed me that I could use (medical) skills to add something to the general state of affairs."

Give back he did. Today, Razek is chief of Trauma at McGill University Health Centre in Montreal and he's the current chair



of the Canadian Network for International Surgery (CNIS), an organization he's been volunteering with for years. His foray into mission work began simultaneous with his career as a general surgeon and trauma specialist, when he conducted feasibility studies at a clinic in Haiti while still a med student. "It was interesting to see these guys (the doctors) struggling to get stuff done with such limited resources." He learned something from that.

As a war surgeon, Razek's been on missions with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. In 2004, he spent four exhausting months at an ICRC hospital in Sudan, where he operated on people seven days a week, 10 hours a day. "It was extraordinarily fatiguing. And it just never stopped." In war zones, the traumas are profound: landmine injuries, children with both legs blown off, pregnant women carrying dead babies. To see a population in such devastation was overwhelming, but, he says, "you generate a lot of respect for the way people bear their suffering."

The bulk of Razek's remarkable record of volunteering has been with the CNIS, which strives to provide surgical services in underdeveloped regions, and where he focuses on training health-care providers in modern trauma-care practices. (Simulations are done on a low-tech, low-cost basis—bamboo and sugar cane, he says, make good amputee models.) He's developed a program called Trauma Team Training to demonstrate how a pre-arranged, team response has a huge impact on positive outcomes.

Razek is now hoping to involve other Canadian docs in his cause by launching an international branch of the trauma surgical service at McGill Hospital. Western professionals can learn much from their colleagues in the developing world, he says, where severe traumas are treated on an almost daily basis.

Michel Crovisier **Teaching Food Safety the World Over**

What does a haute-cuisine chef, former restaurant owner and college hospitality instructor do when he retires? Spread his talent and love for food to the small corners of the Earth as a Canadian Executive Services Organization (CESO) volunteer. Since 1999, Michel Crovisier of Windsor, Ont., has done an astonishing 73 assignments for CESO, in places such as Chile, China, Lithuania and Sri Lanka. As a CESO advisor, Crovisier, 64, mostly helps hotels, restaurants, tour operators and local governments improve their operating practices or tourism industries. He enjoys teaching best, and with CESO, where he's often sent to work with schools, he gets to teach culinary arts to people "who have never cracked an egg."



He admits having particular fondness for Loboc, a town in the Philippines where he visited food establishments and stressed the importance of handwashing (among other things). By the end of his stay, he had helped draw up a food safety course and had the town pass a bylaw making it mandatory that all food handlers be certified. In a small city in China—where small means a million people—he inspected almost every hotel, then met with staff to pass on his recommendations.

In Sri Lanka, he worked at a school in a fishing village hit by the 2005 Tsunami. "When you have a hundred fishermen going after two fish, it doesn't create much of a livelihood." Teaching hospitality gives young people a chance to do something else. In such places, says Crovisier, family is a strong social unit, so if one person is employed everybody gets fed.

Cathy Churchill **Healing the Homeless in India**

Talking to Cathy Churchill you wouldn't know that she's newly single, has toiled for years in the trenches of social work and volunteers at hospices for terminally ill people. Her optimism is in seemingly stark contrast to some of her experiences. But in fact, she says, working with dying people is transformative. "You see how hard they cling to life, and you start to appreciate every day. They make your life very immediate." In some ways, it also gave her the



courage to take that long-awaited trip to India—the one she'd been planning with her (now ex-) husband.

Knowing she didn't want to go alone, she contacted Cross-Cultural Solutions, a group that sends volunteers to Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying and Destitute in New Delhi. It seemed perfect—an opportunity to bring direction to her travels by working in a field of her own expertise. And despite having witnessed a disturbing incident of physical abuse while there—as well as absolute abject poverty—she says the experience was one of the best of her life.

Run by nuns, the home is more for destitute than dying people—those with no place to go but the street, says Churchill, who lives in Knouff Lake, B.C. Some of the residents had physical abnormalities or mental disorders, others tuberculosis (TB) or HIV. She talks poignantly about the paraplegic girl who had the worst bedsores she's ever seen. "They were sort of society's cast-offs, but really nice people! They created their own world, looked after each other." For three months, five hours a day, Churchill did whatever needed doing—cleaning, making beds, helping with nursing chores and meals. Most fun was the daily ritual of peeling the vegetables with the women residents, who playfully fought over who would be able to sit beside her.

It was this remarkable resilience—the ability to laugh even when in duress— that was most striking. A day of treating an outbreak of scabies became a day of playtime; maybe they just liked being touched, she says, or having the ointment spread on their skin. A few times she thought she had contracted head lice, but figured anything she got was curable. "I'm 68, and never expected I still had the possibility for personal growth. I find myself not as judgmental, more open to whatever happens."

Assigned to the women's quarters—mostly just a large room with cots—Churchill says she was greatly moved by the plight of the female residents, most of whom were unmarried and at the home because they were "a drain on their families." She became close to one who had come there as a child sick with TB, and stayed when her father refused to take her back after her mother died. Though now an adult working at the home, she needed a lot of mothering, says Churchill, and it was a role she was happy to play. "When I left she just cried—and I cried all on the way home."

Kim Penzhorn Building Homes in Hungary

Ever since she began teaching, Kim Penzhorn of Ajax, Ont., was determined to make the most of her summers off. "I love to travel, but also wanted to make a difference in the world." With its two-week build-abroad volunteer stints, Habitat for Humanity seemed a perfect opportunity.

That was nine years ago, and Penzhorn, 34, has been helping



build homes for underprivileged families in Poland and Hungary every summer since. (She favours Europe because she spent one memorable year as a student in Paris.) After her first build in Gliwice, Poland, she was hooked—so much so that the following summer she decided to become a Habitat team leader. Apart from picking projects, as leader Penzhorn puts out the calls for volunteers to construct each team, aiming for ones that are as diverse as possible and include both teenagers and seniors.

So far, Penzhorn has been on 13 builds and worked on almost 60 homes in Hungary alone. Hungary is definitely her country of choice, and in 2008 she took an unpaid leave from teaching to work with Habitat Hungary for six amazing months. “I wanted to do (volunteering) for a longer period, live in the community, feel like I’m a part of it.” And building community is precisely what Penzhorn did, constructing eight houses on a street where Habitat had been given a plot of land. “They weren’t just building homes,” she says, “they were building a neighbourhood.” It’s no wonder that, in 2007, she was named volunteer of the year by Habitat Hungary. Penzhorn has been lucky enough to attend a few dedication ceremonies, when the keys to a new home are handed over to the owner. On one occasion, a future homeowner was so grateful to Habitat that he cooked the volunteers a traditional meal over an outdoor fire. “We were all showing each other our family photos, and I had an incredible sense that the world is a really, really small place.”

Kim Penner Dental Care in Central America

Kim Penner admits to a few harrowing moments when she realized the bus winding up the Guatemalan mountain pass wasn’t going to make it. “I think we lost a gear and couldn’t manoeuvre around the corner.” Luckily, she was able to hop a ride with a passing truck and made it to the remote community she was serving for Kindness in Action (KIA), a small, Alberta-based non-governmental organization (NGO) that brings oral health services to underprivileged areas, mostly in Latin and Central America.

A dental hygienist and college instructor from Calgary, Penner, 39, has been on 13 KIA missions, often with her husband, who is a dentist. Founded in 1993 by Dr. Amil Shapka, a dentist in St. Paul, Alta., KIA runs week-long dental clinics, culling from an all-volunteer staff of 250 dentists, hygienists and technicians.



KIA conducts about 500 oral exams, extractions, dental restorations and cleanings on each mission into areas where most people have never seen a dentist. “We gave one fellow a set of dentures,” remembers Penner. (KIA partners with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, a school that

makes the teeth from impressions KIA's teams take in the field.) "He had a smile on his face the entire day, he was so thankful that he got a set of teeth."

But perhaps Penner's greatest contribution is the oral health prevention program she's developed with Shapka. Like many NGOs, KIA wants to include sustainability in its mandate, and will begin training local people to be oral health teachers. A trial phase has been initiated in the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve of Nicaragua.

Without question the rewards are great, but so are the risks. Just getting to remote locations is a challenge, says Penner, whose recent trip to Nicaragua included a four-hour ride over unpaved road, then seven more hours by dugout canoe. And though language is sometimes problem-atic—there are many local dialects in such places—Penner says she's learned that compassion can be shown through a touch or a smile.

Maggie McConnell Giving African Children a Sporting Chance

Maggie McConnell is off to an astonishing start. At only 27, she already has almost four years of international 'voluntouring' under her belt. "I grew up in a small town (in Nova Scotia), and we didn't have broad exposure to diversity. So my mom tried to make us aware of other cultures, to know that we were connected."



With a degree in human kinetics, McConnell's first assignment was at an HIV/AIDS orphanage in Botswana, where she helped develop sport and recreational programs for youth. A project she was particularly proud of was the drama program, where the kids, she says, got to write their own plays about the stigma of being "an AIDS orphan." A year later she went back to Africa—a place she's always felt a subliminal affinity for—doing much the same thing, this time in Tanzania for 15 months as a project coordinator with Right To Play. (A Canadian-born NGO, RTP uses sport to foster peace in underdeveloped areas, and sends volunteers to work in their projects.) RTP runs many programs in refugee camps, and McConnell's task was to help oversee its efforts in five specific camps that had more than 300,000 people fleeing conflicts in other countries.

And quite a task it was. "We didn't have a vehicle and the closest camp was a 45-minute drive away, the furthest three hours." (She hitched rides to the camps until RTP got her a car.) Apart from working with coaches and expanding on activities already in place in the camps, McConnell worked to build a sport infrastructure: "We built basketball courts at every school that UNICEF ran," which she says had stacks of rims and backboards waiting to be put up. She was especially happy that a funding proposal she wrote to help teachers in the camps implement physical education programs was accepted.

So taken was she with Tanzania that a year later she returned, this time as the country program manager for Youth Challenge International (YCI) supervising its Canadian volunteers on various projects. Primarily, however, she was determined to continue her efforts with HIV/AIDS, and invested much time in trying to connect with youth-targeted NGOs that focus on the issue. She lights up when talking about “the transitional school for street kids,” and the youth centre where YCI volunteers helped implement everything from hip-hop workshops to drama groups to gender-sensitivity training. But one of her proudest achievements was in bringing into the YCI fold Makoti Edwin, a young HIV-positive activist who is working to encourage young people to know their HIV status. Now at her University of Toronto campus, where she’s enrolled in a master’s program, McConnell runs the USHUUJAA Courage Canada campaign, which raises funds for Edwin’s efforts back in Tanzania.