

VOLUNTEERING - Difficult, Demanding But No Regrets

'I can't see how you would ever regret it,' Megan Tady was told when she delved into the world of volunteering through the Global Volunteer Network created by Colin and Jo Salisbury.

Photos courtesy of COLIN SALISBURY



There is something striking about the picture: Colin Salisbury, a blond-haired 18-year-old in flip flops surrounded by five Papua New Guinean youth, giving a thumbs-up to the camera. It promised a future where everything was going to be okay.

Perhaps it's the ginger-haired young boys that make the photograph unforgettable. Or the rounded stomachs that belied nourished bodies. Or the clothes, worn day after day, that stretch ripped across torsos and frame startlingly snap-thin legs.



Quite an Impact

Seventeen years later, the photograph hangs in Colin's office. When he's asked how he got into the business of people helping people, he points to it.

Colin says of the six weeks he spent in Papua New Guinea, "For a young guy from New Zealand, it had quite an impact." Such an impact that it was the original inspiration for Global Volunteer Network (GVN), a non-governmental organisation that connects volunteers with communities in need, to deliver on the wordless promise given in that picture those many years ago.

However, it wasn't until he took a trip to Ghana in 1998 that he had his epiphany. Colin, who has a Master's Degree in International Development, was working for WorldVision doing a literacy study in Ghana when he made an alarming discovery. Schools, lacking books and teaching materials, were also lacking teachers. Teachers, underpaid and overburdened, were often outnumbered by a ratio of 150 to 200 students to two teachers.

The Next Step

"Long term, we need to train more teachers," Colin says. "But in the short term, these kids would really benefit from an education now. International people coming in to help fill those teaching gaps seemed like the next step. So that's when I went, 'Wow, there's actually a real need for volunteers.'"

Upon returning home, Colin continued working his full-time job while, with the help of his wife Jo, he began laying the foundations for GVN. "It took me a year working nights to figure out how I could make this idea work. I didn't share it with anyone until I got it going."

Colin found that other organisations charged high fees to volunteer, so he vowed to make his as accessible as possible. “I got frustrated with the fact that a lot of organisations just wanted people’s money and nothing else. I wanted to give people the opportunity to get there, as opposed to just paying their dollar a day.”



Volunteers often get as much as they give

Local Solutions

Colin was also adamant that his organisation would align with the idea of ‘local solutions to local problems,’ working at the grassroots level to achieve their goals. “Local people who live in those communities know their needs and how best to address them. What they need is support in doing that, not someone coming in and setting up an infrastructure when a lot of those infrastructures already exist.”

Colin and Jo officially launched GVN in 2002 with a website and help from the first hired staffers who worked out of Colin’s spare bedroom. GVN began sending volunteers to programmes in Ghana, Nepal and Ecuador. With surprising growth, the organisation leaped from sending just 240 volunteers in its first year to 1,520 volunteers two years later. This year GVN hopes to place 2,500 people, and they are well on their way to achieving this goal.

“I had no idea how well it would go,” he says. “It was kind of like, let’s set it up and put our marketing in place and hope it will take off. And it really did. As demand grew, we added more programmes, and we’ve basically been doing that ever since. It was good timing with the Internet becoming available; it meant that we could provide lower cost volunteer opportunities than organisations that were around before the Internet, that have different cost structures.”

Funds Raised for Children

With the growth of GVN came a proper office and a staff expanded to 18 people. The map on the wall now has 21 pushpins denoting GVN’s programmes in Alaska, Cambodia, China, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ghana, Honduras, India, Kenya, New Zealand, Nepal, Philippines, Romania, Russia, South Africa, South Dakota, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda and Vietnam. Volunteers, who work anywhere from two weeks to six months, are at orphanages, schools, wildlife sanctuaries, nature reserves and refugee camps.

The GVN Community Fund was established in 2004 to support the work of GVN’s partners; and after just a year Colin noticed the tremendous difference resources, combined with volunteers, made in local communities. He decided to extend the

fundraising aspect of GVN and co-founded The GVN-Foundation in July 2005. The GVN-Foundation organises fundraising treks to Mt. Kilimanjaro, Mt. Everest base camp, Machu Picchu and El Camino de Santiago. The treks, a mix of adventure sport and humanitarian aid, add a new twist to the ‘Sponsor my Walk’ fund-raiser, with money going to support a project in the foothills of the peaks, such as a new school in Uganda. Through the treks GVN has raised over \$180,000USD in aid of children around the world.

From Volunteer to Staff

GVN gets over 400 emails a day, keeping programme coordinators busy sifting through travel questions – Should I take Malaria pills? – to taking phone calls from worried mums. Most of the programme coordinators have been volunteers themselves.

“I got frustrated with the fact that a lot of organisations just wanted people’s money and nothing else. I wanted to give people the opportunity to get there, as opposed to just paying their dollar a day.”

- Colin Salisbury

“Volunteering really shows you what a huge difference one person can make in a relatively short period of time,” says Anna Wells, Volunteer Coordinator for the Americas. “You can learn so much about a culture by working alongside a community. It’s something you can’t experience any other way.”

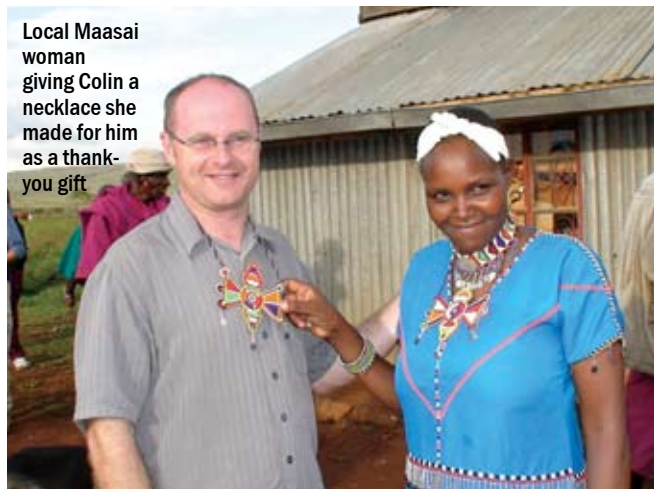
Erin Cassidy, GVN Office manager, volunteered in Uganda for three weeks with her five-year-old son.

“I saw firsthand what volunteering does and how it helps communities,” she says. “It really opens your eyes to how much you have and how much you don’t need. It’s impacted even the way we operate at home. I don’t run the water when I clean my teeth at home. I know that’s just a small thing, but I’m now aware of just how precious that resource is.”

For Charisse Gebhart, GVN Programs Manager, the six months spent volunteering in Nepal changed her world view. “I was barely aware of the poverty and suffering that was out there,” she says. “I’d see the commercials by Sally Struthers, but that was about the extent of it. Witnessing it for yourself is very different from just knowing it’s out there.”



Colin spent precious time with the children from the orphanage following the Everest Fundraising Trek



Local Maasai woman giving Colin a necklace she made for him as a thank-you gift

Gibbons & Giggling Ghanaians

GVN offers a variety of ways to witness it for oneself, from standing up for the first time in front of a classroom filled with giggling Ghanaian students, to giving dinner to a rescued gibbon at a wildlife sanctuary in Thailand, to baking a cake with an orphan in Romania.

“No matter what your skill sets are, there are places where you’re needed and you can contribute,” says GVN Financial Administrator Graham Fyfe. “Volunteering is not a one-way thing. It’s not just going to change the people you’re working with. It’s also going to change you. You’re going to gain more awareness of yourself, of what you’re capable of and what you’re passionate about. It’s worthwhile to put yourself in that position.”

The communities where volunteers work are often deeply affected by their presence.

“One of the main factors of development is self-esteem and national pride,” puts in Hanna Butler, a past GVN volunteer. “When I volunteered in India, sometimes it felt like I really wasn’t doing that much. But in some places, where we were the first foreigners to visit, people realized that they weren’t forgotten. They thought, ‘We’re worth being helped.’”

When volunteers arrived in India to work in a community gutted by an ocean wave — children were separated from parents and homes were demolished — they found many people still stunned and unresponsive.

Acting as Catalyst

“A lot of people were still in shock,” Colin relates. “There wasn’t a lot happening. The volunteers got in and started rebuilding the wells and ensuring that there was good water and everything. As soon as they started, the locals joined in, and in some places took over because they were better at it than the volunteers. The volunteers often act as a catalyst. Local people think, ‘If these people are going to fly half way around the world and pay all the money just to help us, than I think we can help too.’”

In Kenya, GVN has taken it from basically zero volunteers for projects to 60 to 70 on average a month. And while volunteerism creates many tangible changes for communities, from new school buildings to cleaner streams, it also helps to bridge a divide left behind by decades of Western imperialism, colonisation and exploitation.

The GVN Difference

GVN’s programmes allow volunteers a lot of space to use their

own initiative. These programmes work for someone who has a lot of enthusiasm, energy and wants to see things get done. Volunteers make many of the decisions about how they want to spend their time volunteering.

“Some organisations send a guide with their volunteers, and what they do is all very set and concrete,” Graham explains. “While that ensures a certain consistency, it’s also very limiting in terms of what you can get done. With GVN, you’re given support but there are no prescribed guidelines.”

GVN’s programmes don’t require a second mortgage to take part in, but volunteering is expensive. You’ve got to take time away from your own life and work, but still keep it going. People want the best value for their time and money.

Managing Expectations

“Some volunteers think the trip will be a real adventure,” Colin states. “Others think that in the month they are there, they are going to dramatically change the place. Some views are naive, some are more realistic and some view it as a holiday. So we try to get people’s expectations in line with reality without deflating them too much.”

Volunteering with GVN makes acclimatising to the environment a necessity. “For the Philippines programme, for instance, volunteers are integrated into local families, sharing their food and way of life,” says Erin Ingram, Asia Coordinator. “Although volunteers get their own room, the accommodation is simple in keeping with the Filipino way of life.”

Hanna adds. “A lot of people think it’s going to be really nice, like wiping sweat off people’s brows. But it’s long, hard work. Sometimes you feel like you’re not getting much done. And some days you think, ‘And I’m doing this for free? What am I doing?’”

Just Go For It


“I was terrified,” said Charisse, of her first days of volunteer teaching in Nepal. “I had no teaching experience. I was scared about having a classroom full of kids to myself. I didn’t know if I would be able to fill up all the class time and if I would be able to keep them under control.”

How did it go? “The way you’d expect it to,” she said. “There were some rough days, but it was great.”

Other volunteers go feeling the same way. “Every volunteer will have felt the same way. And you don’t always get that from the journals on the website. But that shouldn’t be a reason to stop you.”

“Often there is culture shock,” Erin Cassidy says. “No one can prepare you for that. I’d seen pictures, watched videos, but in the end, the reality was different. After the first few days, when you get over the jetlag and the change, I can’t see how you would ever regret it. I just can’t.”

Colin believes volunteering with communities in need is one of the most important contributions one can make. “It provides you with a unique perspective into the lives of people who are less fortunate.”

“What is also amazing is the impact the experience will have on you. When you return you will not be the same person. You will have a different perspective on life and your role in the world.” 

Contact:

info@volunteer.org.nz

+64 4 569-9080

www.volunteer.org.nz