

Working from the Heart

*An exploration of what propels
12 quality social entrepreneurs*



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Background

Aim of the study

[UnLtd](#)¹, the Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs is a UK based charity which supports social entrepreneurs. As one component of its longitudinal impact evaluation, UnLtd seeks to examine “What makes a ‘quality’ social entrepreneur?”

With the aim of gaining insight straight from the source -- successful social entrepreneurs themselves -- I conducted a series of interviews and constructed biographic case studies on 12 individuals whom UnLtd has supported. Each of these social entrepreneurs is considered successful in their endeavours because they have generated substantial support and buy-in from their communities and have demonstrated that their projects have impacted others’ lives in a beneficial manner.

In learning about these individuals’ personal and professional backgrounds, skill and ability development, and pivotal life moments --the compilation of experiences which led them to the founding of their most recent initiatives-- I have sought to uncover common characteristics and biographic trends in their genesis as social entrepreneurs. While minimal information on the entrepreneurs’ UnLtd-sponsored initiatives was included in the case studies as a capstone to their life experiences to date, my overall focus was on the individual rather than their current project.

What follows the 12 case studies below is an initial analysis of these findings, the foundation for further research surrounding this topic. The implications of this preliminary research are two-fold. First, in a field where a broad consensus on “Who is a social entrepreneur?” has not yet been attained, this research serves to advance the global dialogue. Second, summarising some of the characteristics of successful social entrepreneurs should help UnLtd in selecting future award winners, particularly in instances where potential recipients are not yet able to present an established professional track record of success.

UnLtd’s approach

In a conscious effort to be accommodating, UnLtd loosely defines social entrepreneurs as

Who are social entrepreneurs?

“people who have the ideas and the commitment to make a difference in their communities.” Although UnLtd’s award winners are responding to specific societal needs, UnLtd strives to fund individuals rather than projects.

Level 1² award winners typically fulfil modest requirements: they possess an idea; they can articulate their vision of change and “the basic How’s;” they demonstrate “passion, motivation, and likelihood of success;” and they envision a “future social change for the good.”³

¹ founded in 2002 with a £100 million endowment to promote social entrepreneurship. See www.unltd.uk.org.

² UnLtd’s Level 1 awards range between £500 and £5,000.

³ *UnLtd Awards Director*

Level 2⁴ award recipients are evaluated with an expanded list of qualifications. In addition to the above, they typically possess a higher skill set (i.e., some experience in an organizational or management role) and a “better definition of the How’s.”

Each of UnLtd's five regional units exercises its discretion in selecting and approving funding candidates. UnLtd's Awards Directors and Development Managers alike say that they “just know” when they are speaking with a quality social entrepreneur and rely on instinct to eliminate unqualified candidates or potential opportunists. They judge “honourable intentions and believability” and assess “What elements can be encouraged and motivated in our support-package environment?” There is a significant elusive element to this process. “Sometimes a candidate meets all 10 criteria on our list and still won't receive the award because they are lacking... something.”⁵ The 12 entrepreneurs you will meet below all possess that “certain something.” This report attempts to get to the root of what that “something” is.

Other approaches

While UnLtd seeks to highlight the individual rather than his or her project, other organizations that support social entrepreneurs and/or fund their projects have differing views on the parameters by which “who is a social entrepreneur?” is defined and funding recipients are selected.

Ashoka,⁶ for example, looks for “social revolutionaries”... “The job of a social entrepreneur is to recognize when a part of society is stuck and to provide new ways to get it unstuck. He or she finds what is not working and solves the problem by changing the system, spreading the solution and persuading entire societies to take new leaps. Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry.”

Excerpts from UnLtd's April 2003 research bulletin:

“A person who uses conventional business discipline, management tools and entrepreneurial skills to achieve a social purpose.” - Enterprising Communities (report from the Social Investment Taskforce, published 2001)

“Social entrepreneurs identify under-utilised resources – people, buildings, equipment – and find ways of putting them to use to satisfy unmet social needs.” - The Rise of the Social Entrepreneur (by Charles Leadbeater, published by Demos, 1997)

David Bornstein, author of *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*,⁷ calls social entrepreneurs “the driven, creative individuals who question the status quo, exploit new opportunities, refuse to give up, and remake the world for the better.”

While some other early stage funders place a high emphasis on the person behind the project, many focus on the idea and/or the organization as a means of evaluation. Later-stage funders tend to have a less personal focus. Tracking the project's rate of expansion and/or scalability; management performance; cost effectiveness; fundraising capabilities; and the estimated monetary value of the social benefits (“social return on investment”) are some of the criteria that are used.

⁴ UnLtd's Level 2 awards range between £10,000 and £20,000.

⁵ *UnLtd Development Manager*

⁶ See www.ashoka.org.

⁷ *Oxford University Press, 2004.*

Still other organization's evaluation criteria remove the founding social entrepreneur from the equation all together, examining the likelihood of an enterprise being sustainable once the founder's involvement diminishes.

While UnLtd's potential award winners at the Ventures level⁸ are evaluated using a subset of these criteria, the organization's overall emphasis is nonetheless maintained on the personal character of the individual who has founded a project.

Research methodology

To answer UnLtd's question "What makes a quality social entrepreneur?" I interviewed and assessed 12 highly successful social entrepreneurs from across the UK. Two Level 2 award winners were nominated by each of UnLtd's five units (London and the South & East of England, North of England & Midlands, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) and by the London-based Ventures team. In addition to assessing possible interview candidates on the basis of their personal achievements, UnLtd's nominating units also considered which award winners would be most receptive to the idea of being interviewed. A dose of randomness and coincidence admittedly entered the equation.

Among the 12 nominated social entrepreneurs, I conducted eight face-to-face interviews and four phone interviews, each lasting between one and three hours. Further insights were gained through numerous informal conversations with up to a dozen additional UnLtd staff members, as well as half a dozen additional Level 1 and 2 award winners who are not profiled below.

Rather than conduct each interview with a resolute agenda, or even a checklist of 20 questions, I chose to simply plant seeds of genuine interest and listen to the stories unfold before me. Triumphs and tribulations were recounted; successes were celebrated, and at times tears flowed. (Some of the most painful experiences relived during our conversations, per the interviewees' requests, have not been included below). The case studies reflect experiences, viewpoints and opinions as expressed by each of the 12 interviewees. I have outlined their views to place their stories in a personal context, not because I or UnLtd wish to judge or endorse their viewpoints and opinions in any way.

I do admit to guiding the unravelling of the tales, however. To try to understand their motivations and inspirations, I felt that there were several topics into which it was vital that I delve. These included:

- Family and/or community influences
- Education-related experiences
- Professional background
- Financial leverage
- Evolution of social status
- Community or civil society involvement and/or activities
- Other leadership experiences
- Propensity toward risk-taking

*What motivates and
inspires social
entrepreneurs?*

⁸ UnLtd's Ventures award winners have already established themselves as successful social entrepreneurs, either through Level 1 and 2 Awards or independently of UnLtd. Rather than monetary assistance, they receive consultancy support to help them to scale up or replicate their projects.

- Evolution of personal growth and professional development goals
- Personal and/or community network (e.g. access to formal and informal mentors)
- Lessons learned from personal (& others') failures and successes
- Religious and/or moral and spiritual outlook
- Defining experiences (e.g. international travel, illness, death of loved one, near-fatal accidents, witnessing devastation, etc.)
- Awareness-of-need triggers (e.g. a personal tie to the community they serve)
- Creative endeavours

Findings

UnLtd's social entrepreneurs

The social entrepreneurs with whom I spoke channel their efforts and resources towards a diverse set of activities. Their projects range from creating affordable housing and encouraging skill development among disaffected youth to facilitating civic engagement and offering emotional support to those affected by violence and health issues.

The purpose behind the biographic approach is to offer a window into the hearts and souls of the people behind the projects; to attempt to unlock the essence of the "certain something" that they possess – that intangible yet indispensable element that UnLtd's Development Managers detected and Awards Directors ultimately chose to support.

So without further ado, I introduce 12 of UnLtd's quality social entrepreneurs:

David Hines (Victims' Rights)

"Until it happens to you, you haven't got a clue."

David Hines and his wife Kathy fought a painful three year court battle to adopt an orphaned boy. The child had been left parentless when his mother was killed and his father was sent to prison...for committing the murder. Three years seems like an eternity for people trying to rescue a victimized child from the social services system. The ordeal seems even more unnecessarily lengthy (and outrageously expensive) since the Hines' were the boy's blood relatives; his murdered mother was their own daughter.

Friends and families of murder victims live a lifetime of pain and anguish. At the corner pub, people whisper about them from the next table over. Neighbours drop off flowers and then look away. Life long friends, never sure what to say or afraid to seem happy in front of people in perpetual mourning, fade away.

David and his family were extremely hurt because they felt let down by the system – not only through the painstaking adoption process but also during the trial and criminal conviction process. David's anger grew when he saw his daughter's murderer benefiting from the social service system (appointed counsel, fed, clothed, housed, and treated humanely.) "That's where the tax payer's money is going."

David describes the granting of Legal Aid to a murderer and the refusal of aid to the victims' family an injustice and insult.

For David, the system's betrayal was particularly poignant because, as an elected magistrate in their community, David had been a proud part of the mechanism of justice. "I was supposed to be the knowledgeable one. I was working in the system." David vowed to institute change, to make the system work better for victims. He began with an intense letter writing campaign. He didn't even know how to type when he started. He taught himself in order to create an outlet for his pain and anguish, contacting child services, adoption services, family courts, social services, the media and press, local government, national, government, anyone he could think of. "Murder has a ripple effect. Lots and lots of people are affected."

David pointed out that at the time, there were 42 charities set up to help criminals. Just one existed for victims. (Now there are three or four for the families of homicide). "I wanted advice, knowledge, information... They never did anything for me."

Slowly, others started coming to David. In the first two years after his daughter's murder, around 10 victims a year just rang him up. Through word of mouth, referrals started pouring in. Soon he'd educated himself on legal issues, armed himself with knowledge on resources such as grief counselling, and become a one-man information clearing house for other victims in the UK. He'd even find mentions of grieving families in the newspaper and offer what he could. "If I didn't know the answer, I'd find out."

Ironically David was pro- capital punishment before his daughter's murder; now he is not. "Too many mistakes," he explains, "but at the same time, I do want justice." Murderers in the UK, he explains, can serve as little as 18 months. "We are the ones with the life sentence; there's no escape." Unlike in the US, David explains, the families of victims are not even able to participate in parole hearings, or be part of the legal process.

"Everything is geared for the criminal. I'm tired of hearing about their human rights, the criminals' rights. What about our rights?"

David seeks constitutional changes to address these issues and put the victim at the heart of the 'criminal justice system.' For example, he would like to see the institution of a public defender. "Why can't we prosecute on behalf of the people instead of the Crown?" In his dialogues with the government he sees himself as "a critical friend." He'd also like to see a UK Minister for Victims and a UN representative to speak on behalf of victims worldwide.

Along this path, David's paving the way with dozens of initiatives to improve victims' quality of life. Among other projects and along with others, he founded Victims Voice. (The group was dubbed with this name by none other than Tony Blair while he was still in opposition.)

He's driven from east to west across the US, meeting with organizations that share some part of his vision. He's created training videos and seminars to improve the communication capabilities of law enforcement officers (known as Family Liaison Officers), the ones first in line in interacting with victim's families.

He's been instrumental in creating a victims' siblings mentor scheme to give them a forum for talking about their and their families' worries and concerns and generally helps them get things off their minds. He helps victims get to court hearings when

they otherwise might not have the resources to attend, especially appeal hearings, by which time the victim has dropped out of the financial assistance zone.

And each year David organizes the largest (free) conference in the UK for victims to come together and collectivize their actions. "They want to meet others who've been there."

With so much activity, David often grows weary and tired and from time to time contemplates giving it all up, but he won't. "Until the government provides what this country demands, I'll be around."

Daren Howarth (Earthships: Radical Green Building)

"The bolder we can be, the easier it becomes for others to advance less radical social issues in the future."

www.earthship.co.uk

After a few frustrating years in London's corporate sector, Daren Howarth sold his enviable Victorian flat in Islington and used the healthy proceeds to travel abroad independently. He had a five year plan: to find a way to live less destructively, less materialistically, and self-sufficiently on his own plot of country land. Before leaving London, he also purchased a book on Michael Reynolds' Earthships.

At that point, Daren's career path had already taken him from North London to the jungles of Borneo and back again. After his first degree in environmental science, Daren had set off to Malaysia to study rainforest ecology. What he encountered was a near-fatal illness, and a cynical politician whose biting words shattered some of his naiveté. Admiring the acres of pristine rainforest (an oasis surrounded by bleak, over-harvested land) that the government had managed to conserve for research purposes, Daren heard a haunting reply from a local Malaysian politician, "Sure, it's great... until we need the money."

As he was being nursed back to health by a Philippino woman (who shared her tales of regaining sight from blindness through what she called a divine intervention), his spirituality was enlivened. Daren realized that the world's incentive system needed a drastic transformation and decided to go back to school. It was after his second degree in environmental technology that he entered the corporate world in a vain effort to teach businesses how to go green. (The corporate culture was stifling -- "they wouldn't even let me use my Apple computer" -- and eventually he resigned.) And then, with his new, more personal vision in mind, Daren set off to make it a reality.

After a few years' stint as a "radical activist," his dream materialized in Brittany, France. There he bought a five acre plot of beautifully wooded land. (He recalls that as a small boy he was positively obsessed with planting and replanting trees to the point where it drove some of his family members crazy.) Partially inspired by the housing he'd seen as a volunteer teacher in Kenya (at age 17), he built his own home: a wooden dome, 15' in diameter (imagine a wooden yurt) as a prototype. He envisioned producing other domes as mobile homes for people who couldn't officially reside on certain plots of land, as they could be assembled and disassembled very quickly and easily.

He'd read the book he'd packed for his journey, and the ideas championed by Michael Reynolds had stuck with him. "Earthships resonated with my most passionate feeling of what needed change."

He called one of the key Earthship people in New Mexico, to inquire whether they were working on a similar modular housing project; he didn't want to duplicate the efforts when they were technologically more advanced in this arena. Turns out they were on their way to establish Europe's first Earthship in Belgium. Daren kept in touch and when the project in Belgium derailed because of planning issues, they brought the whole crew over to Brighton. A hectically-organized community meeting led to a surge in grassroots support, and Reynolds agreed to relocate the project. Daren felt he had a natural role navigating the interests of the newly-formed cooperative and the local zoners; he simply thought "I should do this." According to Daren, it was fortunate that permission for the idea was largely buoyed by public interest.

Daren sees the need for the propagation of Earthships and similar 'high performance homes' as a dual pronged issue: "living lightly on the planet and affordably on your pocket.... By the nature of what you're living in, you are fundamentally more connected to the earth."

As of early July, he is now paired up with Michael Reynolds, the patriarch of the sustainable construction movement. "We need to buy land, think big; grow the ideas as quickly as we can." There are numerous regulations that they will need to overcome to replicate the project elsewhere, and Daren looks forward to "some seriously bold experimentation with policy... As Michael points out, if we can put aside vast tracts of deregulated land to test bombs, why not the same for homes?"

Although Daren doesn't (yet) live in an Earthship, his current home will soon generate its own energy using the first domestic wind turbine in Brighton. But for Daren, "It's all about personal energy."

Madeleine Mulgrew (Cancer Choices)

"It's about using our experiences to improve someone else's cancer journey."

www.cancerchoices.org.uk

The day her fourth grandchild was born ought to have been one of the happiest days of Madeleine McGrew's life. Her family's joy, however, was quickly followed by emotional distress. Madeleine also received a diagnosis of breast cancer that day, not two hours after the baby's birth. A few days later, she was back at the hospital for major surgery.

Chain smoking and boldly interspersing her conversation with prolific use of expletives (namely the f-word, in its various conjugations), Madeleine explains how it feels to confront your own mortality when dear friends and family suddenly don't know how to communicate with you anymore.

Madeleine's father was diagnosed with cancer five years before her (and re-diagnosed four months after her). She was devastated. For about a month she distanced herself from him, not knowing what to say or do, or how not to appear upset in front of him. Because of this, she was in a better position to understand how

her children reacted to her own diagnosis. "I could relate to them. I was able to reassure them."

"I had to be very aware of how I handled my diagnosis. My children, parents, siblings, partner all went to pieces. I wasn't given the time to go to pieces. I was constantly reassuring everyone." The need to be the rock for everyone else gradually filled Madeleine with anger: "Who's supporting me?" Fortunately she had the strength to re-direct her frustration into a positive means. "I just had to."

Her way of dealing with the lack of support was to occupy herself with research: "what's available, who provides it, fact gathering, what?, why?"

Madeleine was aided by a long-standing interest in the field of medicine. When she left school at age 14, she went to work as a pharmacist's assistance. (Back then you didn't need any exams to dispense medicine.) Whether she wanted to be or not, in that position she was an amateur counsellor, forever answering people's worried questions about their medications. She says it was just a job, but she did have in her mind that she wanted to be a nurse, which was exactly what she became, for a year. Then she got married young, got pregnant, and after scaling back to part-time and then administrative work, she chose to stay at home full-time for the next 25 years. After raising her four children, she had just recently re-entered the outside workforce as a carer for the elderly.

But even with her medical background, Madeleine had no knowledge of how to exercise her rights, or whether she even had any. She experienced a "horrific incident" (so horrific that no details were forthcoming) with her cancer consultant, someone whom she was depending upon to save her life. "My life as far as I knew was gone. Would I have six weeks or six months? Do I have any say?" She was very emotionally vulnerable and couldn't fathom how she could be handed from one process to the next without any emotional support. "Off you go," they would say. Madeleine experienced a complete loss of control over her own life and felt that she had no say in anything that was happening to her.

Options were not discussed. She wasn't given choices. She felt chastised as an angry patient if she started asking questions. "You're on a roller coaster of emotion. Even when you're given information, you're not able to take it all in or come to terms with it. Who takes responsibility for you on your journey from cancer from A to Z? Nobody."

"I was going off my trolley." Who should she talk to? It took her six months to find a helpline that operated just Tues/Thurs from 9am-1pm. "What if I needed support out of these hours?" She was "flicking' between sanity and insanity."

In her close-knit community, Madeleine's news spread quickly. When other cancer patients turned to her for comfort and advice about their own diagnoses, she happily provided an outlet for them. Soon came the phone calls and then the knocks on her door from people newly diagnosed, upset and anxious. (At that particular time there was a high rate of cancer in her small, close-knit, local community.)

Madeleine was able to draw upon her feelings of vulnerability when receiving her own diagnosis. She saw a need for people to be able to unload their fears and worries without burdening their families.

The need for emotional support was so apparent that Madeleine and her friend, along with four other cancer patients, started a small community support group.

(Madeleine attributes her present day recovery and success to the unconditional support of her long term friend and neighbour Deirdre, herself a cancer patient.) With no training, they acted as sounding boards for over 200 people in their first six months. (The group has now grown into her full-scale support project, Cancer Choices.)

About six months after her diagnosis, Madeleine joined Citizen's Advice Bureau, where she would eventually take her first NVQ Level 3 in Welfare Rights as an accredited volunteer adviser. (Through her work she would eventually become aware of UnLtd Awards for individuals.) She credits her first NVQ to her great manager at CAB who, although very sympathetic and understanding of her condition, saw it as no excuse for opting out of training. Madeleine claims that the only reason that she actually went many days was because someone else was depending upon her for a ride.

When it came time to take her qualifying test, it took her three days in tears even to begin filling out the paperwork. Six months before, she would have done it in a snap. "Mortality just stares at you, consumes you."

Even after receiving the green light from doctors, Madeleine felt "mentally not recovered." She describes her current project, Cancer Choices, as "an emotional response to an emotional need."

Madeleine describes herself as "lumbered with" her role. "Let's just get on with it," is her daily attitude. Does it give her happiness? "#^~*, no!" ...But there's a reluctant "yes" when she's asked about a sense of reward.

"I inwardly knew that I was not going to die. And always had the feeling that I was meant to do something with my cancer diagnosis. I didn't know at that point what it would be. And never would have imagined this. But I was always very certain that my experience with cancer was meant to be used in a positive way." Madeleine insists that it's not in a religious sense, but says that she is being led. "I'm just following."

Able Miller (Skills Innovation Centre)

"I came here, I was dying. How can I not give back?"

www.skillsinnovation2005.bloombiz.com

Bound, beaten, and shot, Able Miller was left for dead in a game park in Zimbabwe four years ago. Miraculously rescued by a game warden, he recalls how he received inadequate medical attention in Harare before being airlifted to the UK, where he was immediately granted asylum as a political refugee. Four years later, he is healthy, is about to receive his Master's degree, and hopes his recycling and skill building initiative will become the launch pad that will lift Glasgow's community of African refugees out of their cycles of poverty.

Able's great-grandfather, a Scottish mechanical engineer, came to Zimbabwe under a settlement program and was granted a large plot of farmland. He stayed in Zimbabwe and married an African woman, as did Able's grandfather, who also studied mechanical engineering. Thus, under the apartheid system, Able and his family fell into the middle 'coloured' class, the offspring of a black and white union. Coloureds were granted access to separate schools, hospitals, and other goods and

services above and beyond their black brethren. “I didn’t come from a background of poverty; I was a wealthy man.”

As the eldest of 10 children, a great deal of responsibility fell on Able’s shoulders. While his mother ran a clothing retail business and his father maintained the tobacco farm, Able shouldered the main responsibility for raising his siblings. He recalls that they pooled resources with aunts, uncles, and cousins and worked “as a family contingent.”

Following in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps, Able also trained as a mechanical engineer. He went to work for the sugar estates which were owned by foreign companies involved in mechanical engineering, including building railroads. One day Able took particular notice of the massive pile of scrap metal lying about on the company’s property. He tracked down the person with authority, learned that they were having a problem properly disposing of it, and offered to buy it off of the company instead. He had a vision of using the metal to create brick making machines, hammer moulds (to crush maize), and ox-drawn carts. He relocated the scrap to his own backyard.

Shortly thereafter he approached a local village with a brick-making machine. The children’s lessons were being held under a tree and Able envisioned them building their own school. He offered to transport the machinery that they’d need and make sure that the children were taught how to produce their own bricks, in return for payment for the surplus bricks that they could sell. The school was built and he (and the village) earned a small fortune.

Soon neighbouring villages’ leaders were approaching him, asking for brick-making machines, hammer mills, etc., one after the next until there were 17 villages with new schools and enterprises. Along the way a second business opportunity sprung as well. Since the machines needed to be transported to the villages, Able had purchased an old truck. When the driver dropped the machines off, he was sometimes asked to take a return load of crops or bricks to the nearest city. Then the questions became, “if you could just deliver our cargo to a ship...” Soon a truck was making various deliveries for the villages every day.

Before he knew it, Able was running 15-20 trucks back and forth across the country daily. “I was commandeered by the need.” When the business reached its peak, he had 135 trucks on runs in and out of Zimbabwe.

For 33 years he ran his businesses, which blossomed into an interwoven network of industrial, construction, and service-oriented (even restaurants) operations. An accident which broke his back made him unfit to work for some time, but this did not hold him back from his burgeoning political career. As a highly successful entrepreneur, Able gained great prominence in his community and was elected to serve as a Minister of Parliament.

As the political situation in Zimbabwe became more contentious and civil unrest was feared, Able’s family left him behind and relocated abroad. His father had been assassinated in 1978, and he was being courted by opposing parties that had a hand in his father’s death. His insistence on neutrality angered both the old and new political parties, which each would have benefited from his alliance, and one night he awoke to a racket outside his house. Using his walker for support, he got up to investigate. It was then that he was seized by an angry mob, beaten, tortured, and shot.

After being set on fire, he managed to fling himself into a shallow pond on his property. He was promptly re-captured and left for dead in a game park known for its prowling carnivores (lions, leopards, and cheetahs). He owes his retrieval to a game warden on an anti-poacher patrol.

The next clear memory Able has is of awaking in a hospital in excruciating pain. It was several days before the head doctor discovered that in addition to his more obvious ailments, he had also contracted Back Water Fever, the most dangerous, life-threatening form of malaria. After a complete blood transfusion Able had a 1 in 10 chance of survival and was sent to a rehabilitation centre with low expectations. However, his sister, a nurse, was determined to save him. She tracked him down and arranged to have him airlifted to the UK for proper medical treatment.

Able has fond memories of his three months of recuperation in a London hotel room with his family by his bedside. But refugee services had other plans for him. Once he regained sufficient strength he and his family were relocated to Glasgow.

Having left everything he'd owned behind him, Able was eager to make a new start. Given his excellent education and practical engineering skills, he thought it should be easy to start a new life. But with Scotland's rigid requirements of national diplomas, he found that he could not work legally. "All my years of experience meant nothing."

With unacceptable academic credentials, his only choice was to pursue the certification he needed. With the government's (and UnLtd's) help, Able enrolled first in a college course, then achieved his BA in Business from Caledonian University. He is now due to submit his Master's dissertation (again in mechanical engineering) at Strathclyde University at the end of September.

Now Able's goal is to use his engineering skills to benefit not only his community of African refugees in the UK but also his native Africa. "Think how many things that are thrown away in the UK each day could be of use there." (He and his partners collectively have ties with in Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya.) "I want to induce economic activity, create jobs, be self-sustaining.... I want to pay back something to society."

Mohammed Mamdani (Muslim Youth Helpline)

"Depravation and a response of anger created my vision."

www.myh.org.uk
www.muslimyouth.net

At age 13, Mohammed Mamdani, a talented honours student, was invited to participate as a tutor in a summer youth program. He agreed to dedicate the last two weeks of the summer to improving 7-8 year olds' skills in English and Maths. Many other young people would have eagerly spent the remainder of their holidays relaxing and having fun, but Mohammed had other ambitions. Unprompted, he worked tirelessly for the first five weeks of the summer creating his own training manual to ensure that his tutorials would be as effective as possible. "Seems so ridiculous now," laughs Mohammed. "Why would I do something like that?"

The son of East African Indians, Mohammed was born in Sheffield, but raised in North London. Fuelled by an incessant stream of ideas, Mohammed can recount "101 short-lived projects" such as this.

At a weekly workshop at a local mosque, Mohammed encountered “a bit of a maverick” who strove to introduce youth groups to social issues such as human rights or prisoners of conscience. Youth were encouraged to engage in initiatives to combat social ills. Each week’s session would conclude with a question like “What are you going to do about this?” Mohammed was hugely influenced by the process. It gave the group a sense that young people could have an influence in others’ lives.

Also at age 13, for example, he set up a local community human rights group that “died very quickly.” “Started so many projects; failed in all,” he says (which is hardly true). He recalls that his parents were very keen that he take part in community activities but says he never felt pushed to participate.

He was, however, sent to attend an elite private school where he felt alienated from his chummy classmates and increasingly isolated. Mohammed saw first hand social integration that “wasn’t quite working” and viewed school as a hostile environment.

Mohammed admits to a sense of “guilt” while receiving a privileged education. “Knowing that you are more privileged was a burden that carried responsibilities.” Working in the community “with more normal people” was not only an escape, but a way of redressing this guilt.

Mohammed recalls that at school he became aware and angered by a societal tendency to vilify the Muslim identity. For several months he would retreat to the school library at lunchtime to read newspapers and periodicals. He became so affected by news stories linking acts of violence to an offender’s Muslim identity that he began to keep a record of every time he did *not* see such details mentioned. He grew increasingly aggravated with the media’s prolific use of terms like “Muslim fundamentalist or extremist,” which “through incessant repetition in the media affects the developing identity of young Muslims and belittles their self-esteem.” According to Mohammed, the consistent link between Muslim identity and violence, retrograde practices and human rights abuses, most young Muslims grow up filled with deep frustrations and anger.

It was the sense of alienation that led him to temporarily drop out of school at age 16. (He later returned and subsequently excelled at multiple A-levels). Mohammed used his new-found freedom to travel independently to Spain, in particular across the Andalusia. There he rented an apartment, studied Spanish, and through the country’s vibrant heritage, tried to come to terms with Islam in the European context. Upon his return to the UK, Mohammed felt more politically aware, more sensitive to Muslim issues worldwide. He sensed a growing solidarity with other Muslim youth struggling to balance the conservative social pressures within his minority community with life as a young Brit.

Mohammed and a tight-knit group of friends had a vision to reach out to a lot of people. “We’ve got to take responsibility,” they thought, for issues like drug abuse and mental health, taboo topics within their community. Their goal was to “radically change the social situation for Muslim youth in the UK.”

During a hospital visit several years earlier, Mohammed had been inspired by a self-help newsletter that was passed around from patient to patient as a pick-me-up mechanism. He realized that peer support was vital to overcoming personal obstacles. He had also briefly volunteered on a local youth helpline providing peer-support on topical social issues but had felt instinctively that “it could be done better.”

These experiences shaped Mohammed's vision for the Muslim Youth Helpline, his multiple award-winning foundation.

Unable to secure office space, Mohammed and his friends installed a new phone line in his bedroom (thanks to his father, who agreed to help with the early telephone and stationary costs) and created an anonymous forwarding e-mail and postal address to maintain contact with those who sought their assistance.

Although they began applying for grants immediately, money was a major issue. The volunteers (all under 25) donated their own earnings to the cause and "every service from building a website to publicity was done in-kind using networks of young people who were sympathetic to the cause."

Another hurdle was registering a charity with trustees under 25 years of age and some of whom were refugees. "It was not easy... A Muslim youth charity openly dealing with social exclusion and marginalisation just after September 11th raised many eyebrows." The process took eight months, without any legal counsel. "We couldn't afford it." Instead, Mohammed and his friends "'blagged' their way through" by meeting with representatives from the charity commission.

For Mohammed, MYH was his way to present an alternative to some of the crises the world has been facing. "If I didn't take personal responsibility, it wouldn't get done."

Julie Lyddon (EcoDysgu EcoLearn)

*"The feedback blows me away, works like magic...
I couldn't do another job now for anything."*

www.cobwebs.uk.net/Ecodysgu

Having recently extracted herself from an unhappy marriage and making regular visits to a homeopath in an effort to regain her former sense of self, Julie Lyddon became entranced one evening by a TV program on Canada's Cree Indians. "I just knew that I had to go there." She switched off the TV, phoned a friend in Toronto, and packed her bags.

When she arrived in Canada, however, her dream was temporarily crushed. She learned that the Cree Indians were located up past Hudson Bay (on the Arctic Ocean), accessible only by hiring either a plane or a tracker and a pack of sled dogs with the equipment to make a several weeks journey. Neither proposition was affordable. So she went exploring in the local library instead and emerged a week later with a new plan: to visit the Ojibway Indians on Manatoulin Island near Toronto.

And that's exactly what she did, literally walking on to the Ojibway reservation and introducing herself to whomever she met. Julie had written down the names of the most inspirational community leaders she'd heard of or whose images she'd seen. Not much later she'd met two of them. She was invited on an Indian Quest and even offered a job in a local café. "There was such synchronicity in the chain of events. It panicked me."

While camping on the reservation, Julie experienced a series of disconcerting sensations: rapid heart beats, nausea, suffocation, a "head explosion" with a burst of colours (pink, gold, white, and purple). Her mind raced, "Nobody knows where I am."

When a day later the heat in her body and pins and needles in her hands still would not subside, she began to fear the worst.

Julie fled toward civilization and had just found refuge with her friend back in Toronto when the phone rang. It was her brother calling with terrible news: the funeral of a dear friend's small child would be taking place in a few days' time. She was extremely torn about returning home. "So much was unfinished. I didn't want to go back." But she told herself it was just a short visit and again boarded a plane. Three days later, back in her hometown, there was a knock at her door. A virtual stranger, to whom she had been introduced just an hour beforehand, explained that she had "no idea why she was doing this," but felt she needed to tell Julie about a healer who was holding a workshop nearby. She thought Julie should go, and Julie did.

Julie explained to the healer her bizarre body sensations in Canada, and he in turn explained that it had been the release that she had been awaiting. Julie had managed to clear her system of its lingering ills and replaced it with positive energy....

Some time later, in her kitchen bursting with women and children working with clay, Julie suggested they all find a bigger place to work out of, the beginning of what was to become her next initiative: an arts and crafts centre. The initiative took off, growing rapidly to include craft workshops spaces for children, an office, a second hand shop and a proposed café.

She'd always disliked the area she'd been brought up in and at 34, after fulfilling her year long commitment to the project, Julie had two yearnings: a new place to live and a need to decide if she wanted children. "I had other things to do with my life." She packed up for a holiday to Ireland, but ended up extending the visit for six months. One day, after whittling a wooden wizard out of bog oak, she was approached and offered a commission to design a town square. She recruited others to help her ("story of my life, always trying to include other people") and would have happily finished the challenging project, but she learned that she was pregnant and decided to return to Wales to have her baby.

Once again back in Wales, caring for her new daughter and helping her mum care for her dying father, Julie had a realization. "I'm here now and, by the looks of things, it's for a while." So she and some friends set up their own healing clinic... which struggled because they offered too many free services to people who couldn't afford them otherwise.

At the time, a friend had charge of a local summer scheme and asked Julie if she'd be interested in organizing an activity for the young people. Julie envisioned a haven where children and young people could experience nature, learn crafts and skills (stained glass making, willow weaving), and benefit from healing practices (Indian head massage, reflexology).

The pilot program took 66 disaffected young people ages 13-25 chosen by Youth Services into the woods for three days with tutors and healing practitioners.

It was only meant to be a one-off project, but the feedback was too extraordinary not to continue. They "couldn't get the kids to go home." And three days after the event, the youth organiser was fielding knocks at her door at all hours of the day from kids asking when they could do it again. The police, who had part funded the pilot project, came back to Julie and said that they'd never witnessed such a profound

improvement in the behaviour of these young people and that there ought to be a permanent site. "I believed it would do something, but wasn't expecting the intensity of the results."

The more workshops they arranged for the kids, the better the results became. A permanent site was found and three years later, the flow of children, young people and adults has never stopped. Over 1,500 participants have benefited from the 'Learning to Heal – Healing to Learn' educational process at EcoDysgu. Julie and her friends have been to the brink of exhaustion and burn out several times, but "the phenomenal process [has] kept us hooked."

There have been (too) many times that Julie has found herself living in "a whirlwind of fear, not being able to pay the mortgage. Not having food in the fridge to feed my daughter." But at least she has always known that she had something to fall back upon.

Although she'd left school at age 15, her first job had "prepped [her] for life." Julie had hated school and "the sense of expectation" placed upon her. She was extremely bored and was called "lazy" by her teachers. After several very poor grades on (what are now the) GCSEs, her father told her that her performance in school was the "biggest disappointment of [his] life." Julie was not discouraged. After fibbing about her (non-existent) typing abilities, she was offered a job as an assistant to a woman who handled the accounts at a local garage. She started a six-week typing crash course the very next day, and after finishing three weeks' worth felt confident enough. The woman took Julie under her wing and eventually taught her every aspect of running a business. "I get bored easily. So I just kept asking her, 'Teach me the next bit.'" That learning has always enabled her to earn money anywhere doing accounts for small businesses.

Now whenever she's not sure how she'll manage, she'll ask for whatever is needed. Usually up to the sky, trusting her faith. One day, she recalls, she realized that it would be safer for the kids if they had some ladders handy to help them climb in and out of the trees. So up to the sky she looked. "I need some ladders, please." Two hours later a construction company lorry drove up the track, piled high with old (broken) scaffolding ladders. Her jaw hung open as the driver leaned out the window. "Do you want these for firewood?"... "Do you believe in Angels?" she replied.

What keeps her going? Knowing that "a girl who was expelled from school 60 times in 10 years before taking part in EcoDysgu has now gone off to college;" the "kids stopping me on the street in town asking if I remember them;" head teachers' comments on the improvements to the children; the young people "who want to come back to the project to work; their comments when they're (not!) ready to go home."

"I'm a very different person now than when I started," says Julie. "Lots of pain thresholds have been crossed... but I couldn't do another job now for anything."

James Greenshields (Prison Radio)

"If they don't re-offend, that makes it all worthwhile."

www.prisonradio.org.uk

Equally at ease in a fancy hotel or camping, James Greenshields showed an independent streak from childhood. The son of a diplomat who was sent off to boarding school at age 7, James fondly recalls plenty of life experiences that (with a huge grin) "would probably now be classified as child neglect." At age 11 or 12 he regularly made his way across London and caught planes, alone. At age 14 he and a friend spent 3 weeks bicycling across France, entirely un-chaperoned. "These experiences gave me an early sense of autonomy," says James.

James' parents thoroughly encouraged him to be an individual. Because of his father's profession, his home was regularly filled with guests from foreign nations. James was encouraged and even pushed to interact with these visitors. The result was a natural social ease which has aided him in his own career growth.

Not interested in just exposing him to the finer things in life, his parents also encouraged James to go to local youth clubs to meet children who were not as privileged as he. Once he realized he was privileged, he was taught to show respect to others, no matter what their backgrounds.

James' career to date has been full of travel and adventure and highly varied experiences.

After studying German (because it was easy; he dropped Arabic after he realized it might "take up too much time") James considered a career in journalism, but was just "not that keen on school." Itching to travel, he instead went to work for a large multi-national. "I was quite politically naïve."

With a gap year in Kenya teaching in a rural secondary school behind him, he was charged with launching a new brand in Francophone Africa (Burkina Faso, Zaire, Cote d'Ivoire, and Gabon) and the Middle East (Oman and the United Arab Emirates). James recalls feelings of guilt lingering after that assignment.

James then returned to London, bought a flat with the income he'd saved, and began renting it out. He then landed an editorial position at GQ magazine ("it could not have been easier") and thought he might make a career of journalism anyway. To make a real go of it, he relocated to Johannesburg, aware that the watershed 1994 South African elections would generate a significant demand for programming material. He seized the opportunity to freelance for the BBC World Service and other international broadcasters, and spent the next 2 years producing radio documentaries from a number of African countries.

During the elections, James met a member of the observer mission for the Commonwealth Secretariat. He pitched an idea that would keep him in Africa, allow him to travel, and get his foot in the door for further broadcasting assignments: a series of 10-15 radio programs from all over Africa to promote local sharing of ideas, with a particular focus on community development projects. The first series was successful, but to get additional funding for the next round of broadcast (travels) he became more ambitious and approached BP for sponsorship (despite the loads of criticism).

To improve his legitimacy as an 'official' UK operation, he used his sister's address in Scotland and set up a dedicated line phone/fax for "Radio for Development" in her spare room. Every once in a while he'd retrieve messages remotely. As expected, BP was eager to improve their image in Africa and was "very generous." So off he went again, across the African sub-continent.

Through the project, James realized what a positive impact radio could have on people's lives. "It felt good to be doing good." He felt a "real sense of responsibility" when one day a group of women in Zimbabwe told him that they "really counted on" his radio programs for news from the outside world. He felt an underlying message: "don't let us down like so many others have."

One day, back in the UK, long ago having ceded daily in-country operations to his capable recruits and Radio for Development now running projects on four continents, he was thumbing through the newspaper and noticed a piece on musicians working in prisons. He spotted a link: both prisoners and rural African villagers are isolated communities that could benefit from radio's power of information dissemination. So he ripped out the page... and immediately lost it in his overflowing inbox. About a year later, packing for a move, he picked it up again. "Do I chuck it or do I do something about it?" So he randomly picked a local prison in the directory and by "sheer good fortune" was connected right to the Head of Education. She loved the concept of education via a medium that would be understandable for all prisoners, especially those who are illiterate, and soon Prison Radio was born. James shakes his head when he thinks, "I so easily could have chucked it."

James admits that what attracted him to the project was "the mystique of prisons" and (in general) "exciting opportunities." He's intrigued by "how all of our lives can so easily go wrong," but even more so by "the challenge of making education engaging and accessible to the widest possible audience."

Rupert Hawley (Common Sense Solutions)

"This isn't going to happen unless it's me."

Growing up in North Devon, under the eye of his Oxford-educated father, Rupert was a very conscientious student, earning the title of head boy at his prep school. "I really, really wanted to do well," he says. That changed, however, when he entered technical college, where he suddenly discovered the temptations of youth; women, drugs, and surfing consumed his days. "I suddenly realized that I didn't have to fit other people's expectations," says Rupert.

He credits his paternal grandmother, and her life-long dedication to the conservation movement, for instilling in him an awe of and respect for the natural environment. One of his first jobs was in Mauritius, releasing endangered bird species into the wild. He enjoyed his time there but found the work too small, too focused. "There were 100 applicants standing in line behind me. If I stepped out of the way, it would still get done; someone else would take my place. I want to be doing things that don't get done unless I'm doing it."

Travel has had a big impact on Rupert. "Seeing how people elsewhere live so simply, that they live in huts and yet have a much freer life. Their communities, networks, interrelations are not shaped by our material pressures." While exploring the world, he also considered settling down in exotic locations the likes of New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii, California, and the South Pacific. He realized that in

these places he could enjoy a decent standard of life, but that it wasn't where he wanted to be. He longed to return to his roots.

But upon returning home, he made an unpleasant discovery: "I couldn't afford to have a good standard of living in my own hometown." (He 'defines' "good" as, for example, having a small home, being able to afford healthy food, and not being forced into a monotonous, unsatisfying job without sufficient leisure time.)

Rupert lived temporarily with friends and in a caravan and truck. "They're great for a while, but there's no security of where you are, and it's hard work just living, collecting water and that kind of thing." He'll need to vacate his current spot after six months.

He partly blames the stock market's vulnerability in recent years. With insecure investment prospects, many chose to buy into real estate, driving the prices out of the affordable range of working folks. Minimum rents are another problem. And low wages which make the alternative of living off the benefits system more appealing.

According to Rupert, the local life boat crew can't afford to live close enough to respond quickly to the shouts indicating that assistance is needed. "Basic life saving functions are under threat because of lack of affordable housing," he explains.

7.6% of households now contain one or more additional households, he says. 62% of people between 20 and 29 and 12% of people in their 30s do not live independently. The result is that many young people move away to find wages that are more in line with astronomical housing prices and rents. "The glue that holds society together is weakening" when people aren't able to live securely within their own communities. "Bonds are destroyed."

Lack of affordable housing is a common problem throughout the UK and indeed throughout many communities in tourist areas. It brings a "mentality of doing what we don't want to do - jobs we have no passion for." The result, says Rupert, is that we treat ourselves with material goods instead, which creates "a lifestyle that is destructive to our planet..." "We need to start looking after this planet. Like the bumper sticker says, 'Good planets are hard to come by!'"

With local materials, Rupert hopes to build affordable, energy efficient eco-housing that will "serve as a benchmark for the industry." He also wants to make living "less centric around the use of the car." (For example parking spots will not be located near the house rather a short walk away.)

He sees affordable housing as going hand in hand with ecological improvements. "As a culture, we worship materialism. What are real are the plants and animals. Plants and animals make our life here on earth possible."

He doesn't know who will live in the houses he's creating (there's a waiting list just to get on the waiting list for local affordable housing) but not knowing their names doesn't bother him. "All the people I grew up with, who I see on the street, I think everyone will benefit."

So many sectors are affected, intertwined. But there's no linchpin that can coordinate among the numerous agencies that tackle the problem from all angles. "This isn't going to happen unless it's me."

Rupert doesn't see himself doing eco-housing projects in North Devon forever. "Maybe going abroad and getting projects off the ground elsewhere. Spiritually I need to be open to what I do next."

Richard O'Neill (Gypsy Expressions & Travelling Life)

"If you're moving up higher, you've got to extend your hand down and pull others up."

www.travellinglife.co.uk

Growing up in a caravan with parents who were constantly following new economic opportunities, Richard O'Neill attended 11 different schools between the ages of 5 and 13. (His parents' insistence that he even attend school was not at all typical among his extended family; most of his cousins did not go regularly.) Although he was a very good student, by that time, enough was enough. Quite typically for a Romani boy who was coming of age, he dropped out and instead began to study his father's trade.

And so Richard learned property repair, often buying, fixing, and selling caravans all over the UK. The trade had grown out of practical experience: Richard's father was born in a horse-drawn caravan in 1925; Richard was born in a modern one. When Richard was 21 his father died and he took over the business, employing many from his community.

While checking someone else's repair work one day, Richard fell off a high ladder and was laid up for several months. At 29 he suddenly found himself with hours to daydream, and free time for studying. (Fortunately he was insured so the incident left him "not concerned about money.") Because the pain tablets he was given had little effect, he chose to research alternative pain therapies for himself. Alternative therapies and meditation exercises such as yoga, he explains, can be traced back through 500+ years of Romani culture. This pursuit evolved into a new trade as a hypnotherapist.

Once again able-bodied, Richard began attending night classes on counselling skills to advance his new career aspirations. In a happy twist of fate, his teachers were so impressed that they turned around and hired him themselves. He became a lecturer on people skills and 'the human element.' Over time, teaching communication skills became another new business. "I was doing pretty ok."

Richard's communication skills had been fostered in an environment full of bustling energy. In his youth, a weekend at grandma's typically meant a space so full that people were bumping into one another. (His father was one of 14 children.) "We were a vocal bunch."

With 1000 years of a purely oral tradition, story telling was one of the Romani community's earliest crafts. A few of the older generation would entrance Richard and his cousins with tales passed down for centuries. Tales of their familial origins in Punjab, northern India, the raid and capture of several tribes of their people by Middle Eastern sultans, their centuries of voyages through modern day Afghanistan, Persia, and Europe. Explanations of their cultural ties to India still to this day: marriage traditions, cleanliness practices, and strict guidelines on modesty. And exhibitions of their cultural dances (the influences of which can be seen in modern

forms of belly dancing and flamenco.) With so many tales and vivid images to draw upon “and a lifetime of sales experience,” Richard became a natural story teller.

Richard talents, he found, were shared by disappointingly few in his generation. It worried him that as the mind-numbing nature of TV and video games kept more and more people at home rather than out socializing, talented story tellers were becoming an endangered species.

Richard was also frustrated that historians and academics without any personal knowledge of Romani were recognized as ‘experts’ and were writing down their bastardized versions of the community’s histories.

At the same time, zoning restrictions in the UK created fewer and fewer places for the Romani to roam. As families settled into houses rather than caravans, Gypsies became more isolated as an unwelcomed minority. The Romani, Richard explains, are very much looked down upon not just in the UK, but worldwide. They suffer under a negative cultural bias which is the result the persistence of myths, untruths, and outright lies. Some of the stereotypes perpetuated about Romani are that they as a people are: troublesome, anti-social, dirty, thieves, and that stealing is a part of their culture.

Sensing a need for an outlet in which Gypsies would feel comfortable expressing themselves without worrying about the grammar rules they never learned in school, he set out to provide a forum for open communication. With the website Gypsy Expressions, he sought to both preserve and pass on the stories that had been passed down to him and create an outlet for the frustration that arises when members of a socially isolated minority face cultural biases.

As awareness of the website grew, Richard began fielding requests for story-telling services. Ever the entrepreneur, he didn’t hesitate: “Sure, we do that.” Speaking at schools is now one of his favourite activities, since he can present a positive alternative image to children who might otherwise be influenced by society’s negative perception of Gypsies. Last year he made six appearances at schools and museums, and this year he’s done eight so far.

Even Richard’s family are now in on the act. His two daughters (22 and 15) both already exhibit talents for their father’s craft, assisting at conferences and helping with the online newspaper, Travelling Life, due to launch this autumn. One has even contributed her own written tale to the online forum.

“Often the best things happen as a by-product of something else.”

James Brown (No Name Productions)

“If you believe in something, you can’t switch off at 5 o’clock.”

Despite James’ working class roots, he proudly recalls “never wanting for anything.” His father, a carpenter, worked massive amounts of overtime to provide for his family. Thanks to his “very socially aware” mother, James grew up conscious that there were people everywhere worse off than his family. And that he should be doing something for them. In the 1950s, for example, long before anti-apartheid became popular, his mother would refuse to buy fruit that came from South Africa because she was appalled by how blacks were being treated.

As a result of a quirk in school district zoning, whereby kids from neighbouring streets were sent to a different school, James suddenly found himself completely cut off from many of his friends. "One street off," he still seems to lament, describing the chasm that suddenly drove them apart. Off he went to a primary school in a "well-off" area, alienated from his roots and by his new classmates. James' view of society was coloured by this experience.

"I had nothing in common with these people. I was quite isolated." At the new school, he saw how the "pushy" parents of middle class kids made sure that their children would succeed. His old friends didn't have that backing. Caught up in the tide of his classmates' determination, James also took the qualifying exam and moved on to a senior secondary school. The majority of other youngsters in his neighbourhood ended up going to the local junior secondary school.

This experience led to a sense of injustice. He deeply resented being cut off and the feeling that his community had been broken up. "The system had done this." (Note: Later on, the Labour government introduced comprehensive education with everyone going to the same type of senior school.)

Lured by the prospect of a career that would let him be outdoors, James went on to spend six years in a professional apprenticeship program as a quantity surveyor, determining the financing aspects of various construction projects. (Nowadays this is a university course.) In career terms, he felt like he was doing well, but he hated it. "Being outside is not the same when you're wearing a three-piece suit." Nonetheless, he stuck with it for nine years, becoming a senior surveyor at the age of 24, and squirreling away his abundant salary.

All this time, James enjoyed a hobby that would lead to his next career jump: photography. When he had finally had enough of his suits, he "bribed" his way into the exciting world of journalism. In exchange for a nice investment in a friend's press agency, the friend agreed to employ him.

After a few years, James then joined as a partner in another freelance news agency that went on to grow rapidly due to some enterprising ideas. In those days, individual freelancers were disadvantaged by union regulations that forced them to phone out their copy to individual newspapers - only members of the appropriate print union were allowed to operate the teleprinter machines that sent copy speedily to multiple destinations. To overcome this challenge, James and his colleagues pooled resources together and hired an appropriate print union member to operate a teleprinter service on their behalf. Their agency was able to grow quickly and their articles and photos were in high demand. (The business model later collapsed with the introduction of a hot, new technology: the personal computer).

His new career as a photo-journalist and later feature writer and print journalist progressed steadily, lasting around 20 years before he grew weary and jaded. Covering car crashes and collecting gory, sensationalist details for the papers sticks in his mind as one of the job's "major turnoffs." All the while James enjoyed his community work.

For many years, James had been volunteering with youth theatre projects, for example. From the age of 17, he recalls being very politically active, openly protesting the Vietnam War in his early 20s and supporting the Chile Solidarity movement. In his last year as a journalist he became involved in a sport project for ex- drug users. "We'd jog around the city, 70 people all wearing red t-shirts. Everybody wanted to join in the fun. But they had to be drug free to get one." It was

these experiences that prompted him to undertake a community work course and qualified him when an opening for a street worker appeared one day at The Big Issue in Scotland, an organization that seeks to empower the homeless.

Through the Big Issue, James could bridge his passion for journalism with his love for social activism. Unlike social service professionals who typically try to impose outside structures on those they work with, the street workers tried to “accept their world.” He likened his time on the streets to having “a diplomatic passport that could be revoked at any time.” His career at the Big Issue developed quickly, as he was promoted to team leader and on up through the management, eventually to board-level.

While at Big Issue, James was spurred to action to produce a documentary film, “On the Other Side of the Street,” after serving on a Scottish Executive committee overseeing research into homelessness. While serving on the committee, James developed the strong feeling that the system was not adequately allowing homeless people themselves to directly communicate their views, experiences and problems – everything was being filtered through professional researchers with decisions then being taken by the “Great and Good,” totally remote from the actual problems on the street. The making of the documentary film was a way to give people who were homeless their own voice.

Although James has now scaled back his day-to-day involvement with The Big Issue, his mind continues to reel with new initiatives. He looks forward to “working with chaos.”... “It’s not a job,” he says, “it’s how I get my kicks.”

Mark McGivern (Angling First)

*“If it could happen to me,
then maybe it can keep other kids out of trouble too.”*

Violence pervaded Mark McGivern’s formative years. On the news, on the streets, at school, at home. “Violence was a currency. If you were a good fighter you had an easier time.” Not fighting back was not an option, and if he ever came home not having been the victor in a brawl “it would have let my father down.” The consequences would not have been pretty.

While his friends busied themselves with petty crimes (breaking windows and ripping off car bumpers were among their favourite pastimes), Mark found solace in fishing. His first rod was a Christmas gift from his father at age 11. “Fishing to me was the most enjoyable thing I could do, away, on my own, no violence, peace and tranquillity; it kept me out of trouble.” Two of Mark’s friends went on to do time for murder. “Without fishing, I probably would have gone the same route.”

The nearest pond was a mile and a half walk from his home. “I walked there every single day after school.”

Other young boys used to come up to the local lake to sniff glue and engage in other unseemly activities. Whenever they approached Mark, he’d simply retort, “None of that.”... “I was just too busy fishing.” (The fish weren’t snacks, by the way, he always cut the line and put them back.) He left school at age 16 because he “hated every minute of it. It was like a prison. So much violence.”

Mark then left home at 18 after his parents threatened to boot him out for “seeing too much of that Catholic girl.” He beat them to it and moved out, continuing to see the girl regularly; he now calls her his wife. They have three children, who are also Catholic. “Religion just didn’t matter to me.”

For many years Mark worked to support his family at an unfulfilling, low-skill job. But he and his wife had the idea to open their own luggage shop and the business took off. His yearly salary tripled as a successful entrepreneur. All was going smoothly until an IRA bomb blew the business out of his local town. They struggled to keep the shop open for 18 months but plunged towards bankruptcy.

Mark became terribly angry and depressed. “We had made this thing that was so successful and in an instant it turned into a situation that bad, completely out of my control.” He went on social assistance and battled mental health instability, at one point being institutionalized.

Mark thought to himself, “What do I need in my life?” The answer was clear: “My fishing.” One of his first steps was to fight for a change in government policy to allow carp to be brought to Ireland. (They were prohibited due to fears of fish disease). “I had a lot of time on my hands.” His lobbying was successful, and he was eventually granted permission for the introduction of the new species.

Next he tracked down a donor for the water source. The donor’s only stipulation was that the area be used for “cross-community work” (mixing Protestants and Catholics in a neutral environment). Without hesitation, Mark obliged.

With so much free time, he just opened a phone book and started contacting various youth organizations, mainly targeting disadvantaged kids. “Maybe I could lead them off of one path on to another.”

The kids he now works with are ages 8-18, typically from deprived backgrounds. In his first two years, he took 1,700 kids fishing. That number has only grown since. “There’s no slack time. None. But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The funding for these trips comes in all shapes and sizes: namely coins and notes. On one of his “flag days,” Mark will drive all over Northern Ireland, up to three hours from his home, stand on a street corner with a bucket for passerbys’ donations for 7-8 hours (“Today I took a 20 minute break to go to the toilet, but that’s pretty unusual.”), and drive home again.

Do people think he’s crazy, standing on a corner, asking for money? “No. Usually when they hear about the project, they tell me, ‘There should be more people like you.’” On his best days, Mark will collect £400; the average is somewhere around £300 per day. He’ll gather donations up to five days a week.

On his beloved days by the lake, Mark doesn’t try to lecture or even counsel the kids. “I’m more like a brother, a friend, another kid.”

One of the kids Mark introduced to the sport has since gone on to represent Ireland in international angling competitions. Another two (one Catholic, one Protestant) have “gone fishing mad,” says Mark. They’re at the lake every spare second of the day and no longer want to be out on the streets. “How many kids out there,” he wonders, “given a little time, a little attention, could stay out of trouble?”

One day they picked up a Catholic boy who, on the way to the lake, saw the Protestant part of town for the first time. "I never knew that there were so many of them," he said, when he saw their flags streaming across the streets, just like in his home area. Mark says this is the real point of the excursions. "He saw something he wouldn't have otherwise seen." Arriving at the lake, the boy was eager to mix right in with his Protestant fishing-mates. "There's the worth," says Mark.

"We have a laugh, have a jolly. And we keep the kids safe, out of trouble. That's the pleasure in it."

Gareth Strangemore-Jones (Ecoliving)

"If we can spell it out, how people can help, they will."

www.campaignpromotions.org.uk

Having orchestrated a PR campaign that reached a readership of 137 million, Gareth Strangemore-Jones stood backstage at the London launch of Windows XP. Microsoft's CEO was speaking to the 3,500 IT journalists assembled before them, and Gareth's boss, whose speech he'd prepared, was up next. All Gareth could think about was what a racist, sexist, homophobic #^*"\@! this man was... so he turned and told him. "I didn't have to wonder anymore how far I could go in the commercial world. I'd done it."

Gareth was encouraged to develop his own beliefs. His family taught him "to ask a lot of questions and, most importantly, to not necessarily accept the answers given."

At 14, Gareth took the bus from Cardiff to London to take part in a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament rally. "The threat was imminent. It scared me rotten." He stepped off the bus and found himself in a sea of protesters. "I felt the force of people power."

This message was reinforced by his beloved history teacher, an "old school socialist." For four years, lessons spilled over into lunch breaks of impassioned discussions on "the world and how it ticks." Gareth was able to formulate his views under his teacher's quasi-paternal nurturing. "I wasn't fighting with him; I wasn't rebelling. He was just talking sense."

A "creative writer by trade," Gareth moved into journalism "to make writing pay" and then "slipped into" public relations, sometimes commercial but often social or campaign communications.

His first major issue to tackle was employment. In the midst of the unemployment crisis of the 80s, Gareth joined the Cardiff City Council promoting its training and back-to-work schemes. There Gareth blossomed under the "superb," one-on-one tutelage of ex- Fleet Street journalists and other accomplished PR consultants. "What I've looked for since are large, important issues."

His "chequered and varied" PR career has led him to and fro: from Japanese shipping to toys, mental health, democracy, animal welfare, and education. He likes to "look at industry standards... and then throw them all away."

One challenging task was orchestrating a change management situation at Brunel University. At one point he found himself taking over as the head of a department,

ironic since he doesn't hold a university degree. "I'm a vocational man, not an academic. I'm about 'how do we do it?' not 'how do we think about it?'"

In 2004, The European Social Forum came to London with the slogan "Another World Is Possible" (ie "we don't have to live like this!"). Gareth joined the ESF's Culture Working Group and realised "that musicians, DJs, artists, dancers and creatives wanted to help but didn't want to go to the turgid five hour political meetings." So he helped set up monthly events under the European Creative Forum, "an open space for all people to express creative visions of another world that includes harmony, inclusivity, participation, empowerment, and authentic communication."

Gareth was taking a break last winter, on paternity leave and back in Wales after the birth of his first child, when the Tsunami rocked Asia. He was devastated by the footage, and his mind went straight to the emotional needs of the survivors.

Gareth had already defied death twice. The first time he was held hostage for 12 minutes, staring down the barrel of a sawn-off shotgun. The second time he was stabbed during a racist attack on a friend. Himself the sufferer of post traumatic stress disorder, he knew that the Tsunami victims would need help dealing with the tragedy. "You can't cure it; there are only tricks to deal with it." (Gareth does his best to find a half hour to meditate daily.)

Gareth and his team "helped push the buttons that made the Millennium Stadium event happen," and the event raised £2 million for the Tsunami victims. He also set up Tsunami Relief as a platform for others to help with the slogan "What can *you* do?"

Alongside dozens of community-change initiatives Gareth has made happen, he is now working on a project he calls "the culmination of everything": Ecoliving. Overarching all social ills, the biggest and most important message ever, he says, is the issue of sustainability. "Without it we're going down the pan anyway."

Seen as the domain of "crunchy sandal-wearers," environmentalism needs translation to make it palatable to the man on the street. Gareth is up for the task. "I'm a communicator," he declares. His art is "transferring one person's thoughts into another person's comprehension," not only through words but also music, art, physical expression. "We're still reeling from the 'me generation.' But now moving toward the 'we generation.' People in the change community are pushing these boundaries."

Gareth is currently in the midst of organizing a series of 12 week long awareness and benefit events to take place throughout the UK. Each event will feature business, school, and NGO- geared forums, and will be rounded out by "cutting-edge stuff" and plenty of music, fun and games. Ecoliving's goal is to introduce appealing, easily implemented sustainable practices into our lives. For example, explains Gareth, sticking a brick in your toilet can make it use less water. "People haven't been told, so how would they know? And if we show them how, they just might do it."

Analysis – what does it all mean?

The words that typically spring to mind when UnLtd tries to describe the people you've just met – *“pioneering, imaginative, resilient, courageous, innovative, charismatic”* and, of course, *“passionate!”* -- give a social entrepreneur an almost mystical persona.

What can we learn from these stories?

What I've sought to outline below are some of the more “tangible” characteristics that these social entrepreneurs exhibit. As unique as each of their life experiences has been, over the course of these interviews, I found that several common distinguishing traits -- related to personality, life experiences, and societal influences – emerged among them.

12 common characteristics of 12 uncommon individuals

- *Resistance to formal education system.* Almost without fail, social entrepreneurs find fault with the structures of formal education. The majority, if not all, value life learning over book learning. Sometimes school was boring, other times they later found that they had learning disabilities that were not recognized or addressed. In more than one occasion there was a sense of severe isolation as a result of being thrust in a school environment that was culturally foreign. Even those who were top students found ways to rebel and/or flee.
- *Restlessness.* Says one social entrepreneur, “Two years is the longest I've ever focused on one subject matter.” A common theme in the social entrepreneurs' biographies is “hopping” from project to project, job to job, city to city. They tend to find different issues very absorbing for short, intense periods of time. Often this can be a source of dismissal in professional situations, seen as a lack of direction or strategic purpose. But social entrepreneurs, at least in retrospect, are able to see each “wild” hop as a piece of the puzzle that has ultimately enabled him or her to amass the skill set needed to enact their ultimate vision.
- *Strong influence of socially-minded individual during youth.* Nearly every interviewee recalled an individual whose impression has stuck with them through the years. Whether it arose from a family member, a particular teacher, or an active community leader, a sense of responsibility and empowerment instilled during one's upbringing tends to lead toward a continued interest in social issues.
- *Spiritual identity.* Whether religious, or non-religious, “spiritual” ties and motivations were cited in multiple cases. Across the religious spectrum, a sense of “duty” to a higher calling was often mentioned.

*“Enterprise is the great leveller.
It doesn't discriminate.
It rewards intelligence and creativity, not
college degrees. They either want your
good or service or they don't. Add social to
that, and it just gets better.”*

- Richard O'Neill

- *Experience as an outsider.* These twelve individuals also shared a desire to experience and learn from new cultures – many have travelled internationally and immersed themselves in new cultures, learning from the comparisons and contrasts with their home environment. Others have sought out unfamiliar communities closer to home in which to immerse and grow.
- *Pivotal life moment(s).* Tragedy is a great source of strength. Once someone has overcome death or illness, or the death or illness of a loved one, other earthly challenges may seem less intimidating. Several of the interviewees recalled such experiences; a few even describe an ‘epiphany’ that led them on their way. In some cases, survivor’s guilt may be a motivational factor.
- *Entrepreneurial approach to problem solving/challenges.* Whether the individual possesses a professional track record or not, their life experience exhibits numerous cases in which an instinct to solve problems and tackle challenges through creative and unorthodox means was present.
- *Pro-risk, “opportunist” tendencies.* Hand-in-hand with entrepreneurial know-how is an unabashed acceptance of risk, or at least a natural aversion to risk adverse behaviour. Social entrepreneurs are seizers of opportunity. When a door opens, there is little wait time before they step through.
- *Self-determined goals.* Families, communities, and society in general extends upon each of us a set of expectations based upon our education, professional achievements to date, and/or social class. Many of us fall prey to building our lives around these expectations and external goals. Social entrepreneurs often do not. Their missions and goals are their own, whether they circumvent or surpass others’ expectations.
- *A vocal conscience and the desire to be a “change activist.”* The social entrepreneurs interviewed above are highly principled individuals who possess clear stances on what is right and what is wrong, and, moreover, are not shy about vocalizing them. When the present societal situation is at odds with their ethical stance, they are responsibility-takers, who claim as their mission to right the situation. Do note, however, these clear ethical opinions are not necessarily religiously aligned.
- *Strong support network.* Whether it flowed from their families, friends, or colleagues, each person I interviewed cited the benefits of encouragement, emotional support, and financial support. In some cases, it’s simply acceptance that once the social entrepreneur dives head first into his or her project, he or she will no longer be as available as a provider of day-to-day support to those in his or her immediate circle. Even this simple acceptance of sacrifice for the good of the social entrepreneur’s goals is vital.
- *Self confidence.* These social entrepreneurs believe in and happily recount instances when they have bravely stood up to trumpet the power of their ideas, even in the face of doubt or intense scrutiny. They tend to be immensely proud of their own self-confidence.

Additional insights

These 12 characteristics are not all that the social entrepreneurs share. Below I highlight additional common attributes: a few more “intangible” qualities that the

entrepreneurs themselves used to describe each other, some of their common desires, demonstrated skills and abilities, mantras, and attitudes. All of these elements set entrepreneurs apart.

What else do many social entrepreneurs possess?

- Sensitivity
- Vision
- Initiative
- Passion
- Self-discipline
- Flexibility
- Commitment
- Common sense

What desires do they have in common?

- To be a “change activist”
- “To cause some trouble and get away with it!”
- To push the boundaries
- To tackle challenges
- To work from within the social issue
- To empower beneficiaries

What does it mean to have “vision”?

- *“The ability to see something happening before it really does.”*
- *“Ideas manifest themselves as projects that social entrepreneurs can see, feel, and taste. To them they are real long before others recognize just the idea.”*

What does it mean to have “passion”?

- *To have a “strong set of values about what society should look like.”*
- *“Working from the heart.”*

What specific skills have they exhibited?

The ability to:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses
- Generate ideas
- Communicate these ideas create a buzz, and “campaign”
- “Orchestrate”: comfort with networking, coordinating and negotiating among different interest groups
- Influence and motivate others, and create change

What attitudes do they exhibit?

The willingness to:

- Sacrifice
- Persevere in the face of defeat
- Deal with the loneliness and isolation
- Take the flack when people disagree or don't like what they're doing
- Listen to their ‘constituents’ needs and adjust accordingly

By what mantras do they choose to live their lives?

- Be people-driven, and people-centred.
- Strike a balance between being kind-natured, and not caring who gets upset.
- Seek to de-stabilize the status quo.
- Balance open mindedness, and stubborn resoluteness.
- Learn something new every day, and do something with the knowledge.

Flaws are o.k. too

All of these common characteristics, skills, desires, etc. contribute to a picture of what social entrepreneurs are. But what are social entrepreneurs not? Contrary to semi-popular impressions, they are not saints! Human flaws abound too.

“Go look at the mentally ill and people who have failed in suicide attempts. Those are the people with great ideas.” – Madeleine Mulgrew

They have vices (ie chain smoking); they use expletives, and have fought personal battles to overcome violent behaviours when they're upset; they can exhibit egotistical, even racist tendencies. More than one whom I met this summer had been institutionalized.

Were they at the head of their class? No. (Well, two of them were, but both subsequently left college.) Did they excel at everything they ever did? No. In some cases, past failures outnumbered successes.

Are they great managers or employees? Not necessarily. Some have been fired from jobs; others have quit and/or burned bridges upon departure.

Do they do it for the glory? No, but many revel in recognition and appreciate public praise.... and some have been accused by friends, colleagues, and their own volunteers of being immature, possessive, self-absorbed, dictating, control freaks.

Do they really need to be visionaries? No... Some claim to have never foreseen that their projects could lead to wider-scale implementation and benefit so many. Others simply “fell into” their projects through good timing. Do they wish they were making a lot of money? Not all, but some sure do.

Social entrepreneurs need not even be passionate about “their” issue for the duration of their service. Perhaps they are good at promoting change, but once change is taking place, they become... bored. The “definition of an entrepreneur is a ‘jumper,’” says James Greenshields. “If you stick with it for more than 10 years are you still an entrepreneur?” One needs to be “a little more promiscuous.”

In sum, social entrepreneurs are the people across the street or next to you on the bus, people just like you, making mistakes, getting angry, occasionally behaving badly.... But they're good at instigating positive change, and they do want to make the society in which we live better. The next question is “why?”

Working from the heart: motivations and inspirations

Now that we have examined both their positive attributes and their flaws... Why do social entrepreneurs get involved?... What motivates and inspires them?

Concerned friend of social entrepreneur: “What’s missing in your head if you want to do this without getting paid?!”

Social entrepreneur: “This is a job that needs to be done. Somebody has to do it.”

Whether internally or externally driven, social entrepreneurs feel a sense of duty to improve the lives of others. The *raison d'être* of the 12 social entrepreneurs I've interviewed can be grouped into three categories (although they sometimes fit into more than one):

- A. Those who have been personally wronged, or seen others wronged, and do not want others to have to experience the same trauma.
- B. Those who have had a very positive experience and wish to share that experience with others who could benefit.
- C. Those who, through an experience of privilege, feel that they ought to give something back.

Let's take a closer look at each of these rationales:

A. Lemons to lemonade

Often the stimulus in this case is a deeply personal, negative experience. Or perhaps they've simply "take[n] objection to something they've found wrong in the world."⁹ In both cases, coping with the reverberations of strong emotions such as anger or frustration serve a positive purpose. The social entrepreneurs who find the inner strength to overcome life's most difficult challenges understand that not everyone has the personal character or resources to fight the same battles, and choose to do right the wrongs on behalf of people who lack the power to do so themselves.

B. Sharing the love

A second motive is a profoundly moving, positive experience that a social entrepreneur believes ought to be shared with others. This experience can build over a lifetime or appear out of the cosmos, much like an epiphany. The activity involved tends to be something that appeals to the entrepreneur, in order for him or her to mobilize personal resources and devote time and energy to helping others share the joy that this experience has brought them.

C. Instant karma

The driving force behind the third category of social entrepreneur is a sense of "guilt." Guilt is a complex emotion that can arise for a variety of reasons. Social entrepreneurs have cited (possibly unjustified) "guilt" over such issues as: the high social status into which they were born, access to privileged educational resources, overcoming the odds related to illness, narrowly avoiding death's grip, general professional (monetary) success, or more generally "rising above" their peer group. The view that life's pluses and minuses eventually even out (or, with a more positive twist, that those who can give should), instills in them the desire to "atone" for the successes that they have been granted. Fortunately this form of atonement benefits others.

In their own words

Do these people consider themselves social entrepreneurs? Some take objection to the term. "The very name 'social *entrepreneur*' is wrong," says Julie Lyddon. "Social entrepreneurs' will make decisions that benefit their projects and their communities rather than benefit themselves. You'll never find a poor entrepreneur."

⁹ - *UnLtd Awards Director*

Others, preferring modesty over proclaiming their own virtues, will use the term to describe themselves only reluctantly. “Social entrepreneurs’ are people who can’t be boxed,” says James Greenshields.

Still others will refer to themselves as social entrepreneurs quite freely, embracing the term as a way to identify a chosen career path. “A social entrepreneur is someone who by just being the world sees what needs to be done, and does it,” says Rupert Hawley.

Parting advice

So what does it take to be a “quality” social entrepreneur? There is no simple formula. Social entrepreneurs are humanitarians who strive to improve others’ welfare through whatever means they can contribute. And to succeed it takes an insatiable desire to institute positive reform of the social standards many of us have come to accept – the dream of better way and the belief that with enough heart, it will become a reality.

A final shared characteristic, common among the social entrepreneurs whom I interviewed, is the selfless desire to contribute to the emergence and personal growth of other social entrepreneurs. To honour this aspiration, I conclude with some parting advice, from the hearts of those who are living out their visions to those who have yet to see their visions bear fruit:

“Aspirations can be simple; they need not be radical.” - Mohammed Mamdani

“Don’t come along with a pre-conceived notion.” - James Brown

“See yourself clearly as ‘I am an example.’ ...Be open to others’ ideas. Agree to disagree. Take criticism. Know your fights. Take risks. Look at each opportunity like it’s your only one.” – Madeleine Mulgrew

“Why not be as hard-nosed as a business person? If you’re confident that you’re doing it for the right reason, you can’t afford not to be thick-skinned.” – Daren Howarth

“Think top of the mountain. If you get half way there, you’ve done pretty well.”
- Richard O’Neill