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Volunteer and Activist

I WAS BORN IN BROOKLYN, but just before I started high school in 1986, my family moved out to Central Islip, Long Island. That's where I started volunteering. It was just a regular thing, I guess. I went with some kids from my school to visit a mental hospital where we sang Christmas Carols. Some people might be turned off by being in a mental hospital, but for me, the experience opened my eyes to a different world, a world most people don't see. It woke something up inside me; a desire to give back and learn about different sides of life.

For me, volunteering is a way of giving love. Some people cut a check. Some people give speeches and attend or organize events. I give my time. Looking at all the volunteering I've done might give people the impression that I'm altruistic, but I feel like it's selfish in some ways since I've got so much back in return. I've had the opportunity to travel and see how incredibly different people's lives can be. That knowledge has expanded me—heart and mind—and enriched my understanding of life and the world in which we live. That's a gift. It's the gift I got back from giving of myself.

When I was in college at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania in 1990, I joined Alpha Phi Omega's service fraternity. We volunteered all over the place: mental institutions, senior citizens' homes, neighborhood cleanups, you name it. There's something about that human connection, about being with people who need help and being with people like myself who feel compelled to help others, which I find gratifying.

After college, I earned my CPA and started working as an accountant for big financial firms in Manhattan. Still, I always felt the need to volunteer when I could, finding the time and energy to do so even though I was simultaneously earning my MBA at New York University. Mostly, I found that an organization called "New York Cares" afforded me the

greatest flexibility in terms of choosing the times and opportunities that matched my interests and schedule. Later, I started using my vacation time to volunteer internationally.

I joined other volunteers working with children in El Salvador, Kenya, Peru, and Fiji. There are areas where people live in the most deplorable slums, and the kids just run the streets, starting as young as age five. Life is so tough, they start doing drugs—sniffing glue mainly—and live on the streets. I helped in orphanages and children's homes, playing games with them and doing crafts. It was a situation where their parents couldn't care for them for whatever reason and had to give them over to an orphanage.

Visiting all these slums, well, it gave me a strange feeling to see people living like that, especially in Peru, the country my family comes from. The flimsy shacks, with roofs made of corrugated metal, were tangled into a hillside, without even any grass around. Families hung their clothes outside to dry and kept their water in plastic barrels on the porch. To be honest, it looked like a strong rainstorm followed by a mudslide, or the strike of a match, could bring the whole thing down in moments, but by some miracle, they clung on.

In Fiji, a place most people associate with fancy resorts and luxury vacations, underprivileged locals live in tin shanties in swampy areas with makeshift walkways to get over streams of water. The water is dirty and cluttered with garbage, but the kids swim and play there anyway. What else can they do?

One thing I noticed during this time is that the proverb, "wealth doesn't bring happiness," is so true. Even though many people are miserable and just give up, I also saw another side. The warmth; the strong family bonds; the inner joy and optimism that people can have even living in such abject poverty is something that I don't often see here in America, the land of plenty. It taught me that you have to look inside yourself for that true joy that many of us seek, but often in the wrong places.

In 2008, when the financial crisis happened, I was laid off from my job at an esteemed financial institution in New York. That's when I went to India for the first time. A woman at my church had a school in a small village thirteen hours by train from Delhi.

Mary is Indian by descent and works as a nurse at a hospital in Manhattan. Most of the money she makes she puts towards maintaining the school she established in a town outside of the mystical destination of Chitrakoot, India: a small city with a rich history of saints and poets, along the Mandakini River. Although in her seventies, Mary is vivacious

and spry and, along with her nephew, greeted me with feeling in Delhi before we embarked on the long train ride to Chitrakoot.

For most of the journey, we slept. Then, when the sun rose, we sipped chai tea served in small paper cups and chatted while staring out the less-than-clean windows. Through them, I gazed at lush green mountains and arid deserts; at the sides of tiny villages with houses made of mud and straw or aluminum siding. I was mesmerized by the contrast between the ambling people and animals and the brisk pace of the train as we wove our way through the countryside, ducking under the occasional tunnel hatched through rocky mountains.

The town of Kawri centered around an open market area. There was a mission against whose exterior wall people had constructed simple lean-to homes. The surrounding area was made up of sustenance farms with tiny houses, where large families slept in a single room and used outhouses. There was no indoor plumbing. Instead, people fetched their water and washed their clothes in the river, hanging it outside their houses to dry.

Near the center of the town, and not far from the mission was Mary's school. When I saw it, I couldn't believe she had done this thing; built it from the ground up. It was a three-story structure with a playground, classrooms, and happy children in cream and brown uniforms.

One of the men who worked for Mary at her home was Pakash. He was slight and cheerful and had this bicycle with an attachment on the back. Every weekday he rode two hours in each direction to pick up children and bring them to school and back. By the time he arrived at school, there were about fifteen kids all hanging off his bicycle. And then they all piled back on at the end of the day, and he took them home!

When I first arrived for a visit at the school, the children and teachers made a big deal out of it. It was such a small, isolated village, and they weren't used to seeing foreigners. They performed dances and gave me leis. It really touched me.

Mary lived in a humble but relatively modern two-story home. I spent weeks with her, touring the area and visiting her many friends. It's hard to explain how different it is in India. So many people are poor, but there is a happy feeling in the air. It gets into you.

One evening, towards the end of my stay, I was sitting on the roof of Mary's house, a flat concrete slab where clothing hung to dry, and monkeys scuttled occasionally along

the raised edge. I stared out over the town nestled in by the distant mountains and felt so at peace, yet that happiness was tinged with the regret of knowing that my time in India was coming to an end. I wanted to stay and resolved that I would come back to India and spend more time there if the opportunity presented itself.

When I arrived back in New York, I still had four months' severance. After working for so long and having such a euphoric experience in India, I was in no hurry to find another job. Instead, I started volunteering around the city, running programs for school children at UNICEF, and being a docent (volunteering as a guide or concert usher). I also attended seminars and conferences at NYU geared towards graduates trying to find their way back into the workforce after being laid off during the financial crisis.

That's how I found the job I have now, working as a controller at a non-profit. I started there in 2009, and everything was great until they hired a new CFO who was just miserable to work for. I soldiered on, but in the back of my mind, the flame of India still blazed, and I did some research and found out that my company had an office over there. I immediately booked a two-week trip.

It felt wonderful to be back. I remember it was May of 2011 because Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding was happening. One couldn't turn around without being faced with some televised aspect of the event or a trinket for sale to commemorate it.

I visited Mumbai and Goa. In Mumbai, I stayed close to the Hotel Taj, where the horrible terrorist attack happened a few years earlier. Mumbai was a beautiful mixture of antiquity and European flavor, and I visited all the tourist attractions and enjoyed myself immensely.

Goa is a coastal town, lush with greenery. I toured most of the area one day on the back of the motorcycle of a friend I made on the trip. Easter Sunday fell in the middle of my stay. I went to church, where I met a woman who told me about the International Justice Mission organization that offered one-year fellowships for people interested in volunteering in antihuman trafficking and slavery.

When I got back to New York, I applied for the fellowship. That email ultimately launched my application, acceptance, and training for this organization, where I spent a year aiding in the rescue of bonded laborers in Bangalore. The experience was both intense and humbling.

Our days started early, at the police station—a sparse concrete building with just a few desks and chairs—where we filed paperwork and obtained release papers for people who had been duped into what amounted to human slavery at rock quarries and brick manufacturing plants.

Traffickers promised them vast sums of money if they went to work in these places and brought their families, but once there, they were imprisoned and never paid. They suffered physical and sexual abuse and, if ever any members of the family wanted to leave the compound, other members were made to stay behind to ensure their return.

It was illegal, and the police knew about it, but they didn't care about those people. We had to force them to do their job. A contingent from my organization would accompany the police officers to the quarry to conduct a raid and bring the people back to the police station. I remember seeing the first group of rescued people. They were tiny—stunted in growth and development from undernourishment—and stared at us with wide, fearful eyes, trying to figure out who we were and if we were going to hurt them or help them.

Generally, the first thing we did was get them food—usually some biryani: rice mixed with meat and vegetables. Then, together we sat on the floor of the police station and ate, and you could see them relax in our company over the meal. Gradually trust replaced the fear in their eyes.

We then arranged transport, rehabilitation, and counseling services. Once they were back in their villages, we visited them. Their villages were dusty enclaves halfway up mountainsides, where they lived in tiny huts with mud floors, no electricity, and no plumbing. Animals roamed freely, including the occasional elephant, and everyone lived in one room and ate off the floor, the food resting on dried banana leaves.

Everything was surprisingly clean, probably because they had so few belongings, just the clothes they wore and the cots they slept on. Yet I don't think they considered themselves poor. They didn't know anything else; just the comparable hardship and abuse of the quarries, so they were grateful to be home at last.

After a year of working for IJM, I returned to New York. I worked at a few different jobs and reached out to my old company, where I heard that the CFO I disliked remained. I felt at a crossroads, not sure what I wanted to do next.

Then, in 2013 I went back to India one last time for a wedding and a job interview. The company I interviewed with was ready to offer me the job, and I knew that this was it. I had to decide if I wanted to live in India after all. On impulse, I reached out to my old company in New York one last time and was greeted with the news that the old CFO had left. I knew the woman who was to replace him. She was a person I liked and respected, so when they offered me a position, I decided to accept it. I felt like I had been so fortunate to see and experience the world, but I also felt it was time to come home.

So, I returned to New York and my old job, but with a wonderful new boss who is an inspiring leader and mentor. Now I'm expecting my first child and am so excited to show him the world and see it all over again through his beautiful, innocent eyes!

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