

The House That Volunteers Built

GOOD WORKS
AREN'T JUST FOR STUDENTS
TAKING A GAP YEAR – CREATIVE
PROJECTS ARE INCREASINGLY
ATTRACTING PROFESSIONALS WITH
A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

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Years ago, in my starry-eyed 20s, I was between jobs and decided to save the world. As you do. Amnesty International was the lucky recipient of my services. As a journalist I thought I'd be a valued contributor, but Amnesty wanted lawyers, accountants, people with real skills. So I wound up opening mail in the post room, saving the world one envelope at a time.

I learnt an important lesson in those two months. First, enforced humble pie. Second, as I sorted through correspondence from supporters, real humility. Most mortifying were the missives from pensioners, long screeds in spidery blue ink, apologising for their reduced donation – the equivalent of, say, R10 a month – as they were struggling to make ends meet. These were people who'd quietly and consistently been giving for years, saving the world without fanfare. 'I do what I can,' one old lady wrote, pledging

around R20 a month. Opportunities to give something back have changed since then.

'Voluntourism' has burgeoned, with Lonely Planet publishing its first volunteer guidebook in 2007. And with the rise of the corporate social-investment sector has come the trend to send employees on team-building volunteer days. It appeals to those who want to do more than donate, who want to physically make a difference. Organisations have responded by devising creative solutions to the world's problems, so whether it's caring for Aids orphans, building community centres or tracking wildlife, there is a job out there for everyone.

All four organisations in this article have long-term projects in place. These are great options to invest in. Their sustainability is not in question – but yours may be. Responsible volunteering is not about a feel-good fix or, in the case of big corporates, a quick photo op. To make a difference requires time and commitment. ▶



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GREATERGOOD SA

Last year 2 690 Old Mutual staff took part in a massive one-week volunteer programme, working at 284 projects around South Africa. Activities included planting spring seedlings in a community garden in Vrygrond on the Cape Flats; developing a business plan for Masisukumeni Women's Crisis Centre; and helping reorganise the office of KZN's World Changers, which runs leadership and life-skills programmes for high-school students and the unemployed from disadvantaged communities. The organisational feat was pulled off by a local company that connects social investors with the development world. GreaterGood SA brings together givers and receivers via its social benefit networking website, which lists over 1 600 nonprofit organisations.

Since launching in 2004, GGSA says it has raised R22 million for good causes and generated 50 000 hours of volunteer time. GGSA is a heavyweight in the growing field of corporate social investment and last year more than 3 500 employees took part in volunteer programmes, doing everything from revitalising children's play areas to digging food gardens. GGSA develops and implements volunteer programmes for corporate clients, which have included Old Mutual, AVI, Coca-Cola, Media24 and Unilever SA. 'In a time of economic crisis, harnessing volunteer energy is a particularly cost-effective and sustainable way for companies to contribute to the upliftment of communities, while at the same time motivating staff and building their skills,' GGSA said in a statement.

NEED TO KNOW These are the same people behind Do It Day, the annual charity drive on 19 September, and South Africa's social 'stock exchange', Sasix, where the rewards of cash investment are measured in improved lives rather than rands. Sasix was only the second of its kind in the world when it launched in 2006 (the first was in Brazil). Companies can reap further rewards in the form of socioeconomic development points for their BEE scorecard, if the volunteering takes place during working hours.

INVESTMENT Whatever you choose to invest, whether cash, time, skills or services.

CONTACT myggsa.co.za, doitday.co.za, sasix.co.za

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY SA

Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit Christian housing NGO that builds homes for poor families, utilising a concept known as 'sweat equity'. This means new home owners are expected

to help build their houses, plus the houses of other families. In total, they must work at least 60 'sweat equity' hours. Funding comes from various sources, including government subsidies, home-owner's savings and volunteer contributions. Habitat for Humanity is an international organisation, founded by the late millionaire Millard Fuller in the 1970s in the US, and currently operates in over 90 countries (Bon Jovi supports it – in the band's *Who Says You Can't Go Home* music video, you can see Habitat volunteers at work in Philadelphia).

The NGO has been building in South Africa since 1996, helping over 2 300 families into decent homes in the greater Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg areas. Big business has come on board, too, sending staff to help. Feryal Domingo, the regional social investment manager at BP Southern Africa, is an experienced volunteer – she's been on seven builds around the country, in Gugulethu and Masiphumelele in the Western Cape, Sherwood in KwaZulu-Natal and the Kenneth Kaunda Work Project (KKWP) in Pretoria. 'It's usually a week-long build per project,' she says. BP staff get stuck into everything, 'from mixing cement, installing roof trusses and skimming walls to laying bricks, installing window frames and doors, fitting glass and laying roof tiles'. On the KKWP build, they even had to lay the foundation.

'By making a small sacrifice of BP employees' time, the company can contribute to a much bigger picture,' Feryal says. 'Our staff got to know each other on another level, which resulted in very strong team-building.' Other SA companies that have taken part in corporate builds include Old Mutual, FNB and Ernst & Young.

NEED TO KNOW There are three options for groups of 10 to 15 volunteers. First, 'A Day of Difference' has volunteers digging trenches, mixing concrete, painting walls, clearing sites or adding the finishing touches to an existing house. 'The Back Breaker' scheme involves similar tasks but over five days, and 'Raise a Roof' is the ultimate effort: helping a family build their home – from slab to roof – all in a week's work.

INVESTMENT 'A Day of Difference' has a sponsorship amount of R17 000, 'The Back Breaker' scheme R46 000, and 'Raise a Roof' R88 000.

CONTACT To arrange team-building events, contact Peter Francis: peter@habitat.org.za. Individuals can contact Habitat for Humanity's regional volunteer coordinators (011-836-0710, 021-670-2044, 031-309-8482) or subscribe to the monthly e-newsletter. habitat.org.za

ABOVE (left) On 'Do It Day', volunteers helped the Abalimi Project in Gugulethu dig a food garden; (right) a pair of helping hands on a 'Building Blitz in Khayelitsha Site C for the Niall Mellon Township Trust

VOLUNTOURS

On the same day the Beijing Olympics opened, another sporting sensation was taking place in the rural Ndebele village of Mapoch in North-West Province. The community was celebrating the debut of its first cycle track, built by volunteers of the Bokamoso Bicycle Project. The Imvelo Responsible Tourism Award-winning project is run by Volontours, a South African company with its HQ in Midrand. A couple with experience in tourism and development, Marnie Heim-Stafford and her husband, Jeremy, started Volontours in 2002.

As an example of responsible volunteering in action, Jeremy says they are most proud of the bicycle project, which has empowered a poor, isolated community. Now there's a bicycle shop in the village offering repairs, servicing, spare parts and second-hand bikes. People run businesses off the back of trailers built by Volontours, delivering everything from veggies to the odd TV. Bike fundis are needed to help train young people in the art of bicycle maintenance, and budding inventors to help re-engineer, build and market cheaper trailers than the present ones by using recycled bike frames. Other tasks include designing a mountain-bike course and helping set up cycle tours in the area.

Volontours also offers two conservation ventures in the Eastern Cape – the 'Wildlife Experience' involves tracking and monitoring lions reintroduced at Amakhala Game Reserve near PE, and the 'Marine Mammal Certificate' involves studying cetaceans for a nonprofit research institute, the Centre for Dolphin Studies, in Plettenberg Bay. Volunteers are housed locally; for example, in Plett a volunteer house sleeps six, while in Mapoch there is the option of a guest house or home stay.

NEED TO KNOW The company does offer short-term programmes, but Jeremy says ideally people need to set aside four weeks or more. Volunteers fall into three age groups: the gap years, the career breakers in their 30s and 40s, and the over-50s, some of whom are retired. Volontours has had clients from age 14 to 71.

INVESTMENT From R7 650 a week. Fees directly benefit the needy – in the Mapoch programmes, Jeremy says, 70 percent goes to the community (it's paid to the Ndebele tribal council, who then pay villagers to provide accommodation and food). Also, 10 percent goes to the project concerned.

CONTACT volontours.co.za

THE NIALL MELLON TOWNSHIPS INITIATIVE

General managers and housekeepers worked side by side when Southern Sun Cullinan sent a group of 50 staff on a corporate build at Khayelitsha Site C in Cape Town. Hotel sales manager Joanne Friedrichs says the atmosphere among the group was 'phenomenal' and it was a good team-building exercise: 'It's a great environment for barriers to be broken down and to learn to interact with people you don't usually work closely with.' Her team worked on ceilings, painted interior walls and varnished window frames, and at the end of the day they all gathered to hand over keys to a new home owner. 'There were some speeches and a ribbon on the front door and it was very emotional for the family,' Joanne says.

Southern Sun is one of several SA companies doing corporate builds via this Irish charity, known for its annual 'Building Blitzes', when volunteers from the Emerald Isle arrive en masse. Irish property developer Niall Mellon was moved to start the housing charity after visiting Imizamo Yethu township in Hout Bay in 2002. In its first year, the charity built 150 homes; last year it built 5 000, bringing the total to 11 000. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a big supporter – he became the first member of the charity's Volunteer Club at its launch last November. Metropolitan Health, I&J, Deney's Reitz Attorneys, Ninham Shand and KPMG have also volunteered staff members. The University of Cape Town sends first-year students from its Dept of Construction Economics & Management to build homes for a week as part of their practical assignments.

'We are currently building in 23 townships – 13 in the Western Cape and 10 in Gauteng – and although we've only been in existence for seven years we are currently the largest charity provider of quality social homes in South Africa,' the organisation said in a statement. It's also involved in training unskilled workers and says it has created employment for 2 000 township dwellers.

NEED TO KNOW One-day individual and corporate builds run every month. Transport, a picnic lunch and T-shirt are provided for volunteers.

INVESTMENT Individuals must raise R1 000 per building day; corporates R2 000 per team member.

CONTACT Mandy Wallace: call 021-426-2540 or email mwallace@nmtt.co.za. For a full list of what's on in 2009, see townshiptrust.org.za ●

ABOVE (left) It takes many hands to monitor the lions at Amakhala Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape, one of the projects offered by Volontours; (right) 70-year-old volunteer Charles Addison from the UK and shop assistant Solly Mbhele with trailers fashioned out of bicycle frames in Mapoch village, North-West Province

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