

Trading Big Oil for the Slums

A former Shell executive who once led a 600-strong marketing team has turned her hand to volunteer tourism to help build homes for the poor.

Diana Judge grew up in New Zealand where she studied and then began working her way up the corporate ladder. Looking for challenge she joined Shell in 1996 and spent 10 years with the company, living in Auckland, Melbourne and the United States in a global marketing role before she had what she calls her Slumdog Millionaire moment on a visit to India.

"There I was in my chauffeur-driven limousine going to the airport when a little girl holding a baby began banging on my window asking for help. There was nothing I could do."

So when her contract in the US was ending, she told Shell she would be leaving to "retire" at the age of 37.

"I wanted to go back to New Zealand but there weren't many jobs at my level."

She had only been back for a short time when a conversation with leading Christian rock band *newsboys* led her back to the US to help set up an aid organisation.

"I finished at Shell at midday on a Wednesday and that night flew to New York."

She spent 10 weeks on the road touring with the band recruiting building volunteers for Mexico and raising a million dollars in aid money.

In 2008 she set up her own organisation, Break Free Expeditions, which runs trips to various parts of the world where people pay to travel to an impoverished community to help build schools and homes.

Judge said those who go on the trips vary in both type and age. "We tend to get about a third of our volunteers under the age of 25, a third between 26 and 40 and a third over 40 (our oldest has been 63 years old) which makes a great team mix". Volunteers vary from parents who take spoiled children to give them a wake-up call, to wives of corporate leaders, students and retirees, to those looking for a more meaningful holiday experience.

"The difference in the volunteers when they leave a house build is just huge" says Diana. "Our volunteers may come with a range of motives but just about all of them come home feeling humbled by the people they have met, and amazed at how they cope with such hardship. Trips such as these certainly broaden a person's world view about poverty and provide an

individual with a hands on way to help a family start to break the cycle of poverty”.

Over the past 3 years she has taken over 200 people to help the poor and orphaned and is now offering volunteer travel opportunities to Australians. A team of Melbourne city workers are planning to head to Mexico in June to build houses in the slums of Tijuana. No building experience is required on Break Free Expeditions as they hire local labour to oversee the project. They also purchase all materials locally thus putting money back into the local economy.

Those who go on the trips pay for their airfare, accommodation and food costs as well as putting some money towards the building materials.

“I find recent media about volun-tourism, “do-gooders” and the harm that they cause very interesting. And sure history has shown that some aid organisations and governments don’t always get it right – but how many good stories don’t get published? I visited a family in Mexico in September 2010 (we had built a home for them in 2009) and asked the wife to show our volunteers where she had been living. Her face fell and she looked sad at that request and told me she hates going to the back of house where their old shack they were living in still stands (it’s now a storage shed). I asked her why and she responded “that was my old life – and I hated it – this is my new life (pointing to the new house) – and I love it”. In the old shack that was 6 feet by 9 feet made of old pallets and bits of old tarpaulin, 5 of them were squeezed in there. It had a mud floor, it leaked, her marriage was a mess, and they were going hungry a couple of nights a week. A year on and what a transformation! A happy family in a humble home they would never have been able to afford themselves, food on the table, and her husband had recently got a job as a storeman. Theory and debate has its place but you can’t argue with the first hand experience of a woman who has had her life changed for the better by someone like you helping her into a home”.

The City Bible Forum is planning to run a trip to Mexico in conjunction with Break Free Expeditions in June this year. For more information on Diana Judge or on the City Bible Forum trip please contact Robert Martin on 0412 632 435 or Robert.Martin@citybibleforum.org.

