

BUILDING BRAZIL



TOP TO BOTTOM: Volunteers and beneficiary family members constructing a house; volunteer Geraldine and the son of one of the beneficiary families working alongside each other.

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF MONYATI INITIATIVES, MONJA WOLF IS PASSIONATE ABOUT HELPING THOSE IN NEED AND ON ONE OF HER LATEST CHARITY MISSIONS TO BRAZIL, SHE ENLISTED THE HELP OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AS VOLUNTEERS. WHILE THEY BROUGHT POSITIVE TRANSFORMATION TO A DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY, THEIR OUTLOOKS ON LIFE HAVE CHANGED FOR THE BETTER TOO

WORDS | TIFFANY ESLICK

“You realise that you cannot help a whole community at once, but you can definitely make a start,” says Monja Wolf about the work done by her non-profit social development organisation, Monyati Initiatives. From establishing a social business for rickshaw pullers in Madagascar to constructing classrooms in India, Monja and her team have completed a number of international charity missions since 2009. All these are underpinned by the philosophy that in order to make the smallest difference within disadvantaged societies, engagement and dialogue with the respective beneficiaries is key.

This year has been a busy one for Monyati Initiatives. One of its latest undertakings saw Monja and a group of volunteers – in partnership with Un Teto, Delos Living and Etihad Airways – successfully construct six low-cost houses during a nine-day period



for families living in *favelas* [slums] near São Paulo, Brazil.

For this venture, Monyati Initiatives handpicked volunteers from a variety of UAE-based universities as well as abroad. Etihad Airways sponsored the air tickets to Brazil which enabled the volunteers to join forces with local youth groups and participate in a cultural exchange while learning firsthand about social development work. The teams worked alongside the various recipient families to build stable houses – each costing approximately US\$1,750.

For many of the volunteers, participating in such a large-scale project was a novel experience and a far cry from their home comforts. “During our time in Brazil, we stayed with the beneficiaries in a school inside in the favelas and we all slept on mattresses on the floor,” says Monja. “It was freezing cold and you don’t even have a shower. This experience really put things into perspective on a personal level for everyone involved while allowing us to truly engage with the community.”

Despite weather extremes, tough living conditions and the long hours of arduous construction work, the volunteers made Monja proud. “They were all amazing,” she enthuses.

IMAGES: Amelia Johnson.

“No one complained about anything. Seeing them stick to their commitment for the project was great.”

The feedback from the volunteers has been wonderfully positive too, each of them taking away a host of memories and life lessons.

“I hope you don’t think that I am crazy but I really, really liked the life in the favelas!” exclaims Ahmed, a 22-year old student from the UAE. “This is because people there live a simple life. Nobody cares how you look or what kind of outfit you are wearing or what kind of family you come from.”

While he evidently enjoyed his time in Brazil, being exposed to harsh conditions also made him appreciate his home country. “[Thankfully] I was born in a country like the UAE where I live in a safe place and I don’t have to worry about my children each day,” he exclaims. “[I live] in a country where the government offers their citizens free education, free healthcare and a house or land. I think I will need [to send] millions of mails to express gratitude towards our government!”

Kiko, an international development student, made some interesting observations about society and human nature. “I believe people can really come together and break boundaries. It was so incredible to see young volunteers with different backgrounds and religions working together and establishing relationships with the favela families,” she explains.

“Despite poverty and hardships, the families were all so generous and welcoming. There really is no difference between us and as clichéd as it may sound, we all bleed the same at end of the day. I was fortunate to be born in Dubai but I might as well have

been born in the favelas. It’s not your choice what kind of life you are born into, but if you can make it even slightly better for others then it makes it all worthwhile. We’ve seen throughout history, when people set their minds to doing great things, the results are almost always mindblowing. We definitely need more of that – collective people-power for positive change.”

One of the outcomes – but definitely not a requirement – Monja was hoping to see as a result of exposing the volunteers to this project is that they would be inspired to start

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Emirati volunteer Jameela with one of the beneficiaries; one of the beneficiary families, Christiano and his two daughters, during the handover of their new house; the Monyati volunteer group (L-R): Amelia, Jameela, Kiko, Rami, Geraldine, Monja, Ahmed, Danny and Mohamed.



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their own initiatives. Judging from just a few of the volunteers’ responses it’s fair to say that Monja’s wish has come true.

“I feel [this experience] has made me more optimistic and hopeful,” says Kiko. “My studies about poverty and politics had left me somewhat bitter about the world, but this project showed me that it’s so easy to make other people happy. No matter how small something may feel to you, it could have a life-changing impact on others. This project has really inspired me, and has given me a sense of duty towards others. I am now obsessed with volunteering.”

Geraldine, an architecture graduate, says that her time in Brazil has encouraged her to pursue a career in the humanitarian field. “The entire experience was phenomenal,” she enthuses. “I definitely want to be more involved in activities like these and help as many people as I can. Nothing can measure up to the immense joy of the families once we handed over the houses to them. It was that joy and the idea that they now have spacious, stable homes that made it all worthwhile.”

While building six houses may not seem like a lot, rather than doing nothing about the numerous global challenges and complexities of struggling communities, Monyati Initiatives is making its mark. “A new house goes a long way for our beneficiary families,” says Monja, “besides shelter, it gives them confidence, hope and strength to tackle other needs within their community as well.”

