

Passion is the reward for non-profit workers

By JUDITH TIMSON

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In this post-tsunami moment, while we're still basking in the glow of our unprecedented cheque-writing generosity, it's worth remembering some of the other worthy causes out there, and the people who work for them full-time.

I've often wondered whether the job satisfaction level for those who choose to use their considerable talents and expertise altruistically is higher than it is for the rest of us, even when donations don't come rolling in (which is to say almost all of the time).

To try to find out, I nearly tripped over a hockey stick lying across the floor last week when I wandered into the Toronto-based office of Engineers Without Borders. The stick was there because several of the young engineers who were shipping out the next day on year-long missions to Africa were heading off for one last game at a local rink in the waning afternoon sun.

Among them was Dave Damberger, a 23-year-old Alberta engineer who is good enough to play AAA hockey (raising, his colleagues proudly point out, his "non-geek" status to a very high level indeed). He is going back for a second stint overseas.

"I won't be playing hockey for a while," he said with a smile. Instead, he will be in Zambia, helping to build a foot pump that just might transform a farmer's life, enabling him to quickly irrigate an entire field of crops and therefore actually make money.

George Roter, the 28-year-old co-CEO of Engineers Without Borders, combines a social conscience with entrepreneurial zeal. Five years ago, Mr. Roter and Parker Mitchell, a fellow engineering student at the University of Waterloo, opened up a file in a drawer that was the beginning of EWB. It was an attempt to put a human face on engineering and find a way for engineers to contribute their skills to alleviating world poverty.

When you've maxed out your credit cards, gone cap in hand to people asking for money, grown an organization from scratch to a respectable million-dollar-a-year operation, and you still make about \$32,000 a year, it's worth looking at your level of job satisfaction.

"I get up every day with a burning desire to get to work," says Mr. Roter, who credits his upbringing -- parents who were both generously open to the world and entrepreneurial themselves -- for inspiring him.

Mr. Roter and Mr. Mitchell have built Engineers Without Borders into a high-quality organization with 22 chapters at various universities. Before they go overseas, EWB engineers train for almost a year to learn, among other things "the delicate art of not wearing everything you've learned on your sleeve." They also

learn how to live on \$10 a day eating the local grain -- no eating at the only Subway restaurant in town -- with the result, says Mr. Roter, that "the communities just open up to them."

Mr. Roter calls what he does "passionate pragmatism." That word passion fairly flies out of the mouths of non-profit workers.

Each generation redefines social activism, and each works with a different set of problems and solutions. One thing this latest generation of young altruistic workers has going for them is that they are the most globally connected in history. A click of the mouse and they can be in touch in very immediate and concrete ways with war zones and world poverty hot spots.

On a more challenging note, they are themselves the products of an alarmingly materialistic society, one in which what they do and the intensity with which they do it can make even their peers uncomfortable. "Let's put it this way," says another non-profit leader, Samantha Nutt, the 35-year-old co-founder and executive director of War Child Canada, an agency that helps children in war zones: "It's easier to talk about the new car, the planned vacation, and the renos to the cottage with someone who *doesn't* work for a charity, let alone one dealing with as heavy a subject as war."

Dr. Nutt, who is also on staff part time at Sunnybrook and Women's Health Science Centre, runs War Child Canada with her husband Eric Hoskins, also a doctor. After more than a decade travelling to dangerous war zones, she is spending more time in Toronto while she is pregnant with their first child.

She says there are several misconceptions about altruistic workers -- she's not even thrilled with the use of the word altruistic because "it implies sacrifice." Life in the non-profit arena may not have the same financial rewards, she says, "but it's like any other career that involves following your passion. In the end, your reward comes from waking up every day content with where you are in life. That's not altruism -- that's a gift."

According to Dr. Nutt, over the years, the professional requirements for non-profit work have grown to be at least on par with, if not exceeding on average, the for-profit sector.

She and her husband, a Rhodes Scholar, have 12 degrees between them, and that is another way in which they are set apart -- it is one of the few professional areas she says "where academic qualifications and professional experience and responsibility do not correlate at all with the way you are financially compensated."

It's pretty obvious what you don't get in the non-profit sector. Dr. Nutt spells it out anyway:

"You don't have any influence, because you depend by necessity on the kindness of strangers. It certainly isn't about the money. The travel is anything but

glamorous, and can even be life-threatening. There is no pension, unless you work for one of the big charities. And you work 16 hours a day."

But far from complaining, Dr. Nutt echoes Mr. Roter: "As for job satisfaction, that's where you get it back tenfold."

Dr. Nutt believes that members of the so-called Y generation see and want different things in their careers than previous generations did, and may be even more open to non-profit work for periods of their lives.

They may have a sense, she says, that making such a contribution "comes with a peace of mind that straight monetary gain rarely brings you in life." She says she doesn't want to sound like "a cheesy American Express commercial" ("what money can't buy"), so she'll stop there.

I don't have the heart to tell her it's not American Express, it's Mastercard that does that commercial.

When you're not firmly rooted in the material world, these kinds of distinctions get lost.