

## Top 40 Under 40

Jeff Hale, The Globe and Mail, May 3, 2005

Parker Mitchell, 28 and George Roter, 28

What started as scribbling on the back of a napkin at a Timothy's coffee shop in Toronto in 2000 eventually produced a simple but daunting goal: fighting global poverty.

Parker Mitchell and George Roter, friends and mechanical engineers who graduated from the University of Waterloo in 1999, thought there was an opportunity for young engineering students to lend their expertise in helping nations in Africa and Asia become self-reliant and administer to their own food, water and electrical supplies.

Inspired by the enormity of the challenge, the pair soon fashioned a name after Doctors Without Borders. They put a combined \$30,000 on their credit cards to send their first workers overseas in 2000. Today, Engineers Without Borders has more than 9,500 members and 22 chapters across Canada. They have raised \$2-million to fund EWB's work and more than 150 young Canadians have gone abroad to work on its projects.

Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Roter realized they were on to something when an EWB conference in January, 2002, was attended by 175 engineers.

EWB provides the means for local groups and communities to help themselves. Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Roter scout many of the areas themselves, speaking with community leaders or other non-profit groups to determine what needs to be done. Volunteers, who receive three weeks of training, are sent overseas for terms lasting from one to three years and are paid wages commensurate with local scales, in most cases between \$5 and \$10 a day. That helps the volunteers earn the trust of the community.

"What we recognized almost immediately is that the technologies exist," Mr. Roter says. "There are technicians with decent skills. But you have a mismatch in how that knowledge and skill is being applied, especially in rural areas."

In one instance, a diesel generator helping to process food in Ghana might not be running at the proper speed. EWB volunteers can solve that problem and show the local people using the machine how to fix it if it happens again. The local people, in turn, can transfer this knowledge to their fellow citizens, particularly those in the next village that acquires a processor.

"There is a knowledge, and a feeling, that one is leaving the world a little bit better than when you found it, as corny as that sounds," Mr. Mitchell says.

Both cite their parents as the source of their philanthropic natures. "They always wanted me to do the right thing," Mr. Mitchell says of his parents, David and Daphne. "That was what was important to them, not how much money I made."

Mr. Roter's parents, Sol and Carla, were free spirits -- his mom's first job was as a clown at parties and theatrical shows -- and they often sheltered homeless people.

The rewards can arrive unexpectedly. Mr. Roter recalls receiving a letter from a churchgoer named Eustace a month and a half after Mr. Roter had wandered into a small church in Zambia and had spoken with the congregation. It cost Eustace the wages of a day and a half of work to mail the letter to Canada, Mr. Roter says.

"Basically, what he said was, 'I had a pretty awful view of Westerners before you came. But you came with humility and you also came with this genuine interest in making a difference in our lives. For that, I thank you and I want you to continue with your work.'"