

“We Started With No Resources”¹

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“I’m surprised my parents let me go to the interview,” Megan Campbell remembers.

In the spring of 2000, Megan was a high school student in Kitchener-Waterloo looking for a summer job. She answered an ad that George Roter had placed, spoke with him on the phone, and arranged an interview. “He said I should meet him at the old box factory by the train tracks, and that there was no need to dress up – how sketchy does that sound?”

EWB’s first paid employee, 18-year-old Megan worked for four months at the old Boehmer Box Factory, where George and some friends from university had rejigged a loft space to make offices for their start-up companies. “The first few floors were still used for box factory storage,

¹ Throughout this book, the first person “we” is used to refer to the organization as a whole, including all of us as members and including you, the reader. Occasionally, “we” is used to refer to EWB national office staff. These exceptions will be clear, we hope, from the context.

so I had to go up these narrow, rickety stairs past pallets and pallets of boxes to get to our office on the third floor. We had huge windows, wood floors, couches, and a bunch of George's friends working on their own tech projects. They were typical Waterloo computer geeks: raving about Open Source, making jokes about Linux, and full of ideas for building their own software."

Within weeks of moving into the old box factory, it had become more living space than office. George and his friends rigged up a shower system, ordered pizza, drank copious amounts of coffee so they could work crazy hours trying to get their projects off the ground, then fell asleep, all in the same space. Megan remembers that she'd get to work at 8am most mornings, and around 11am she'd hear the shower start up in the loft space above the office, where George slept. "Then I'd know my boss was awake."

Meanwhile, Parker also was working on EWB, not in an old factory, but in downtown Toronto in the midst of expensively-furnished offices and state-of-the-art meeting rooms. Parker was a consultant at McKinsey and Company, where fresh fruit and coffee were set out for suit-wearing employees to snack on as they climbed the spiral staircase to their cubicles, which overlooked the majestic stone buildings of the University of Toronto. Furtively, Parker worked on EWB from his desk, hoping his fellow consultants wouldn't notice. Late at night or on weekends, he could be found in a back corner of the office on the treadmills, where employees could go to burn off steam in the middle of twenty-hour workdays. Here, Parker set up his EWB "office", spreading out documents in front of him on the treadmill and furiously trying to figure out EWB strategy.

EWB's nerve centre was more than George and Megan in Waterloo and Parker moonlighting at McKinsey, though. All across Ontario, EWB's first

leaders were working double time juggling EWB with school or co-op internships (and frequently using their office resources for EWB work). A graduate student in water resource engineering used his spare time to develop some of EWB's early print materials, an engineering student on a government co-op job in Ottawa stayed after hours to set up overseas volunteer placements, and countless students skipped classes and settled for lower grades on assignments to spend more time helping EWB get going.

In 2001, George decided to commit full time to EWB. He had been putting in around 35 hours a week while he tried to finish his Masters, but decided that EWB deserved 75 hours a week of his time. He moved to Toronto and started working out of a room in his dad's office building; a year later, after completing a Masters in Development Studies in the U.K., Parker joined him. Although their enthusiasm was still high, both Parker and George were scared to death of failing. They felt the stress of flying by the seat of their pants and continuously being on the verge of running out of money. Parker remembers spending a year living in the

“For six straight months, I woke up with a spurt of acid in the pit of my stomach.”

- Parker Mitchell

Roter family basement, relying on George's family for food to eat and a place to sleep. Both broke, George and Parker had put around \$30,000 of their own money into EWB, using a small amount of savings and an incredible amount of credit card debt. “I couldn't believe we were really going to do this,” Parker says, “and I honestly didn't think we were going to be able to.”

“Good luck, and don’t have sex”

Mary Roach and Eliza Waddell, two of EWB’s earliest volunteers, had a firsthand taste of what a shoestring organization EWB was. As we were starting from nothing, the path for their overseas placements was wide open. So wide open that we hadn’t had the chance to put together any training for our volunteers before shipping them overseas. We were learning the hard way that starting an organization meant identifying all the things that needed to happen, then accepting that half of those things would fall off our plate due to a lack of resources. George remembers, “Mary and Eliza went overseas with very little training”: the “very little” consisted of George meeting Mary at a coffeeshop in Montreal, handing her the plane tickets, and saying, “Good luck, and don’t have sex.”

In those first years, it was the beauty of starting from a blank slate that allowed so much innovation and possibility. Alex Conliffe was another early EWBer who remembers thriving on minimal resources while mapping out organizational direction. “We had never tackled these types of issues before, but from the beginning we attracted thoughtful and competent people. We were naïve, but we had a foundation of talent and intelligence.”

Alex, who at the age of 19 founded the McGill chapter, came to work with George in Toronto for the summer as an intern. At the time, the EWB office was in a tiny closet-sized corner that held George, a desk, and a plant, with not a lot of room to spare. When Alex arrived, she peeked into the office skeptically at the piles of paper, George’s knees hitting his desk, and his elbows practically against the walls. “Well,” he said, “maybe if we move the plant there will be room for you.” Alex, sensibly, offered to work from home.

Unlike most summer jobs, Alex's position didn't come with a job description, an operational plan, or a manual. No one had ever done her job before, and no one had thought through the challenges she was asked to solve. "Alex arrived and I needed to tell her what she was supposed to work on for the summer," George says. "I said, 'We have 15-20 chapters at universities across the country, they're all doing different things, they're not in communication with each other, and we need to share learning between them and figure out what it means to be an EWB chapter. Go!'" Armed with her one sentence instructions for the next four months, Alex set out talking to chapters across the country, finding out what they were doing, what was working, and what wasn't, and compiled all of what she learned into the very first chapter manual.

"Starting with almost nothing," Alex says, looking back, "was a modus operandi for EWB."

“The hope that EWB would do something better”

Sara Ehrhardt joined EWB because she thought we had it all wrong.

In those exciting first days, we were talking with anyone who would listen about what EWB was going to do – talking about how engineering students could solve the world’s problems and how we were going to be the organization to do it. Our loud enthusiasm got the attention of Sara, a Waterloo engineering student with an eye for social causes. Unfortunately, what Sara had heard about EWB’s plans didn’t make her a fan of what we were doing. The founding members seemed naïve, ignorant, and over-confident to her, and she worried that EWB had the potential to do more harm than good. Sara spent a week or so thinking about it and debating what she would do. Should she get involved at all? Go straight to the founders and tell them they were all wrong? Start her own group? After thinking it over, she took a proactive approach: “I’ll share everything I’m thinking; if they listen, then I’ll get involved.” A two hour conversation later, Sara accepted the job of sending all of our volunteers overseas. “When I had worked in Guyana,” she says, “I saw atrocious projects that left people worse off. I got involved partly out of the fear that EWB would do projects like that. But I also got involved because I was hoping that I could help create an organization that wasn’t going to be like the others, an organization that could do something different.”

Sara fit in well with our makeshift office approach – she spent her first summer with us with EWB as a “sideline” to her co-op term in Ottawa. Being the incredibly productive person she is, she was able to do both her co-op job – successfully - and develop our entire original overseas sending model at the same time, without her supervisors ever knowing. At that point, Sara had the most experience of anyone in EWB when it came to the practical realities of development work, and she also had the

knowledge and the people-focus to set up our initial overseas program, interviewing and selecting our first volunteers.

Sara remembers them all: the very first volunteer, a Waterloo civil engineering student, boarded a plane to India in early January 2001 to work on a web-based portal for an NGO² in Gujarat. We celebrated – we were so proud. We had a volunteer in the field! Doing work! There was no stopping us!

On January 26, we turned on the TV to learn that a 7.1 earthquake had devastated Gujarat. The death toll was in the tens of thousands and rising. We received a desperate call from the volunteer’s mother: “Where is my son? Is he okay?” George remembers how hard it was to answer that we didn’t know. For days, we frantically tried to reach him, and

“I’ll never forget how scared we were when we lost contact with our first volunteer.”

- Sara Ehrhardt

eventually Sara started filling out a missing person’s report. Finally, the phone rang: he had found a satellite phone, and told us to tell his parents that he was fine and that, along with his NGO and anyone else who was able, he was helping with the disaster response efforts.

Relieved, we thought about what we had gone through – terrified about what might have happened to him, trying to track him down, and then finding the originally planned project cancelled. He told us about the stress of disaster work and about the many humanitarian organizations who had set up their emergency relief efforts within hours. Knowing that organizations like Médecins sans Frontières and the engineering group RedR were ready to respond in crisis situations and were geared toward emergency work, we felt reaffirmed in our decision that EWB would concentrate on longer-term work outside of conflict or disaster

² NGO: non-governmental organization

zones.

Another of our first volunteers, Jean-Luc Riverin, taught us about the importance of humility and understanding the local context. An engineering graduate, Jean-Luc had completed a placement in the Timbuktu region of Mali in the winter of 2002 and, upon his return, was heading back to further studies at École Polytechnique. Sara, who had originally selected him as a volunteer, had spent the summer pulling 12-14 hour days in the EWB office, unpaid, constantly questioning and improving the overseas sending program. One afternoon at the end of August, they finally met to debrief Jean-Luc's experience – the first time he had spoken to anyone from EWB about it. By that time, he was struggling to get used to being back in Quebec and feeling homesick for Mali. He described to her how, during the dry season, entire families would use less than a gallon of water per day; the meal of rice and goat that a group would eat out of a communal bowl for their lunch; the lengthy greeting with which he met his coworkers and neighbours, asking about their health and their family members; the resilience and spirit of the desert communities. He talked about learning the local language, Sonraï, in order to connect with his community. To Sara, who had been so worried about selecting the right volunteers, Jean-Luc was a credit to our screening process. "I was so touched and humbled that someone cared enough to make sure he learned the local language. It demonstrated his patience and commitment. I realized then that we had picked the right person." Long before we had any sort of training program, Jean-Luc was showing what sort of qualities to look for in a volunteer, and the importance of integration into the host community.

"My time overseas made me realize that if you want to make a difference, you have to commit. There's no half-assed 'show up for a week and do this or that'. You have to decide to live there. You have to commit to being a part of the community and being there for a long time, time to see both the good and the bad."

– Chris Richards, 2004 Junior Fellow

Since Sara joined us, and since that first volunteer got stranded in Gujarat, we've seen evolution after evolution in our thinking about development and our overseas work. We now have one of Canada's most extensive training programs for volunteer sending, with five weeks of intensive learning. Our partnerships with local development organizations tend to be multi-year and span multiple EWB volunteers. And our overseas placements grew from an average of four months to a minimum of twelve months for a long-term placement. Through the lessons of our first volunteers, of people like Mary and Eliza and Jean-Luc, we learned to develop a training program, set up volunteers for maximal integration into their local community, and to focus on long-term commitments to development work.

“At EWB, we don’t see what’s not possible”

Our first few years were full of ambitious commitments. “Even when we were four people in a room at Waterloo,” George remembers, “we were calling ourselves a national organization. We knew that’s what we wanted to be. The problems we wanted to address were so huge that we knew we had to get big, and quickly. We believed that we had to make commitments that would force us to achieve our goals. We weren’t going to make average promises and deliver average results.”

With our pragmatic engineering approach, we reasoned that no matter how big our goals were, we could work out the pathway to get there. In reflection, Parker thinks that we set goals that anyone else would have seen as unrealistic, but because we were so naïve, we didn’t see them that way. And once we had the goals set, we were so scared of failing that instead we worked all night, again and again, and figured out how to do things we had no idea how to do. Because we absolutely had to do them. We made our grand intentions public, practically having “overcommit and overdeliver” as a motto for our first few years.

But nonetheless, this was a risky decision – we could set ourselves up to fail gloriously over and over. Sara remembers a constant tug-of-war between what she saw as her balance of reason, and George and Parker’s unrealistic ambition: “I’m more cautious. I would say we could maybe send three people overseas; George would decide on ten. Both George and Parker had the gall to do things they had no idea about, and I was always nervous ... but it generally worked out.”

It wasn’t always easy. We entered into a partnership with the Centre d’étude et de coopération internationale (CECI) to jointly send 15 volunteers overseas. The agreement with CECI was that we would have a substantial amount of funding secured in advance. But in fact we didn’t

have the funding at that point, nor did we know how to get it. We paid as much as we could during the two years of the partnership, but had accumulated a \$25,000 deficit by the end. For the next 18 months we scrambled, determined to pay off our debts. We eventually found ways to come up with the money, paying it off in installments as small as \$100 at a time as donations trickled in. “It was one of my proudest moments when we finally paid CECI back,” Parker remembers.

Aiming high, and then working hard to make sure the details took care of themselves, was part and parcel of EWB’s birth. In Montreal in 2002, two weeks before the first EWB conference, the mood was somber. We had launched the conference earlier in the year when we had eight chapters and expected 50 people. By the time the conference had rolled around, we had ballooned to fifteen chapters and 175 delegates had

“We have the confidence to think that a 20-year-old with no experience can organize a 600 person conference, with a budget of \$150,000, while going to school full-time. We think that a new member should be able to approach the Prime Minister at an event and tell him what they think about Canada’s foreign policy. We have a healthy disregard for the impossible.”

- Brendan Baker

registered. But we had raised only half the money we needed, and only half the speakers were confirmed. A harsh meeting painted the reality for us: we were going to have a conference and go broke, or we were going to have a conference where no speakers showed up, or maybe both. We threw ourselves into a last-minute sprint of speaker-searching and fundraising, and, thankfully, our efforts paid off with an exceptional lineup: many people still involved in EWB today look back at those first presenters (such as Bunker Roy, the founder of the Barefoot College³, who spoke to us about “unlearning”) as pivotal in their understanding of

³The Barefoot College is an organization founded on the conviction that “solutions to rural problems lie within the community”, and puts an emphasis on “practical knowledge and skills rather than paper qualifications through a learning-by-doing process of education.” (<http://www.barefootcollege.org/>)

development.

The origins of what is now an award-winning national EWB program – School Outreach – came out of one of these instances of making a big, risky, exciting commitment without knowing exactly how we would pull it off.

In January of 2003, we received a phone call out of the blue from someone claiming to represent an anonymous donor. The caller said the donor had heard about our work and was interested in a proposal from us for work relating to Canadian youth and water issues. Not having many details, and not thinking anything would ever come of it, we threw together a proposal without much thought, sent it off, and forgot about it.

A few months later, we received another call. The mystery donor, the caller told us, “was ready to reveal herself.” We started joking about finally meeting our “mystery donor” - a grandmother with jars of pennies saved up? A shadowy underworld character suddenly seized by a guilty conscience?

And when our finally revealed mystery donor walked through our door, she did bring a fascinating combination of interests. She has held her own in the corporate world for decades. She is a published poet. She brings people together with calm, optimism, and goodwill, and her voice - which you can hear on the program she hosts on the Guelph University radio station - carries all of these qualities. She believes in the individual’s ability to make a difference in the world and she is interested in how youth, particularly, can learn about charitable issues.

But when Alden Hadwen walked through our doors in early March and introduced herself as the Manager of Community Investments at

Aeroplan, all we could think of was the half-thought-through proposal we'd given her and how to get it out of her hands and prepare something more sophisticated for her.

But she was understanding, and she was willing to give us a chance. As we talked, we found out the extent of the potential partnership she was describing – she envisioned a way in which Aeroplan could support charitable organizations through an Aeroplan Miles donation program. Not only would Aeroplan spearhead the program by making significant Miles donations, they would also advertise the program to Aeroplan members, so that members could choose to donate their Miles to EWB. We tried to maintain our composure during the meeting and not look too excited, but our eyes were popping with the possibility – imagine if all our overseas volunteer flights could be funded by donated Aeroplan Miles! It would make for a huge reduction in the average cost for each overseas volunteer, and it would provide a way for us to be able to travel to visit chapters and increase the national connections of the organization. Alden explained the possibility all very calmly, as if she was just talking over tea rather than presenting us with what was probably our biggest financial breakthrough yet.

While EWB had an overseas program that Alden was excited about, she also wanted a program for Canadian school-age youth to learn more about water issues, and wanted to link that program to the potential Aeroplan partnership. As we talked to her, we explained that that wasn't really what we did at EWB – we sent volunteers overseas, and where would we find the capacity to do more? George and Parker were already working full-time, and two volunteers, Sophia Wong and Russ Groves, were also contributing 40 hour work weeks on top of their day jobs. No one was receiving a paycheque yet, and EWB's Canadian programming was little more than a glint in Sophia's eyes. We still thought of ourselves as an overseas sending organization, not as a group that was educating

global citizens here in Canada.

But as we suggested a few other organizations for Alden to talk to, we began wondering: maybe we could do this? As she was leaving, we suddenly decided to connect her with Tim Brodhead, the head of the McConnell Foundation, the leading foundation understanding and supporting youth engagement in Canada. And, more importantly for what was to follow, a foundation we hoped would support us.

After Alden left we looked at each other. Should we do it? Could we be the organization to engage school-age youth across Canada about water issues? We didn't have a program in place, and we didn't have the staff or infrastructure to support a national program ... yet. But perhaps there was something in the works. That year, the University of Calgary chapter had created a new initiative, which they called Sustainably Canadian. As part of their initiative, they had been giving presentations to high school students about development issues. Long before we at the national office could have conceived of a program like School Outreach, the U of C chapter was already designing and implementing it, creating workshops and going into high school classrooms. We were impressed at the stories they were telling us – how interested high school students were, how appreciative teachers were, how they'd found an entirely new audience to engage in development – and other chapters were expressing interest in what the U of C chapter had started. It was in a lot of members' minds that workshops for high school students could be scaled up across EWB chapters and provided nationally. We didn't know how we'd be able to do it, but it seemed simple: we were going to pitch this program to Alden, and we would begin by suggesting the idea to Tim.

When Tim and Alden met up in Montreal, she asked about youth programming and potential Aeroplan partnerships, and Tim, who we had met once the year before, had enough faith to recommend EWB

to carry out the work. Within the space of a few days, we'd gone from telling Alden we weren't doing engagement work in Canada to putting together a proposal that would somehow see EWB reaching high school students in cities across the country with a slick, packaged program available in both official languages. We sat down with Alden to figure out a way that we could expand U of C's school outreach program to a national level, with Aeroplan's support, and become Aeroplan's first external charitable organization partner. We were confident on the surface – but underneath, we had no idea how we were going to make it happen.

While the Aeroplan partnership was exciting, it wasn't going to cover staff costs. We were still worrying that Sophia and Russ were going to spend the rest of their lives working full-time at engineering jobs while simultaneously volunteering full-time for EWB. But luckily, Tim knew what it was like to start an organisation, having co-founded one of his own twenty-five years earlier. The afternoon of his meeting with Alden, Tim called us and suggested that if we were to kick off something so ambitious perhaps we should ask his foundation for “fifteen thousand dollars or so” to help build our initial capacity.

We thought we might as well go for broke ... or at least pretend we'd heard him incorrectly. We sent in a proposal for **\$115,000**, crossed our fingers, held our breath, and waited to see what would happen.

In the meantime, Parker kept sleeping on the couch in the office, to the consternation of anyone holding an early morning meeting; Sophia dreamed of the possibilities of a Canadian education and outreach program at our chapters, but kept going to work at her environmental engineering job; Russ continued to be fascinated with membrane filtration systems at his day job, and plotted overseas placements in Ghana at night; and George crisscrossed the country visiting chapter

leaders, wondering who would be the next year's chapter presidents and the future year's national office staff.

Sophia remembers the month of waiting, wondering whether or not we would get the money from McConnell that would determine whether or not we could hire her and Russ. They were ready to come on board if we could guarantee at least \$25,000 in salary a year – a huge pay cut for each of them. She had already written her resignation letter to her current employer and had it sitting on her desktop, just waiting for the word to print it out and hand it to her supervisor. And then one afternoon, we were thrilled to call her up at work and tell her the good news: McConnell had come through with \$90,000 in funding. With the funding in hand, we could safely say the Aeroplan partnership was a go ahead. EWB was ready to take her on as a full-time employee.

“I opened the document and hit ‘CTRL-P,’” Soph remembers. The resignation letter went to the printer, and Soph started cleaning out her desk.

The year that followed was one in which EWB became more defined and went through rapid growth. Having full-time staff made a huge difference in what we were able to do, even though it still meant early morning meetings, late nights devoted to last minute projects, and weekend discussions of how to go forward. By late 2003, Sophia was officially EWB's Director of Education and Outreach and supported 21 chapters. Russ was the Director of Overseas Projects, and had led the first group of Operation21 volunteers (now Junior Fellows) through their training and placements (all with the good humour, aplomb, and wisdom that earned him the title of “Mother Goose”, with volunteers following and looking up to him like self-described ducklings). Russ and Parker put together one of the first full pre-departure training sessions for long-term volunteers in the winter of 2003-2004 with great success –

many of the people who were in that group of overseas volunteers were still involved with EWB several years later, serving as board members, overseas, or with professional chapters. And George continued building the backbone infrastructure of the organization, from our charitable status to our early IT systems.

With all of this in place, we were ready to coordinate a national organization. At the same time, chapters across the country had been making sure that we would have the processes and people power to build EWB's work both in Canada and abroad. 💡

"I wear my ring all the time; it grounds me when challenges are huge."

– Alden Hadwen, long-time EWB supporter, speaking of her EWB "Circle of the Baobab" ring, signifying an ongoing commitment to human development.