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Charity bosses who bring joy to poor around the world . . .

By Jonathan Kent

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BEHIND the slick presentation of what has become known as "Bermuda's biggest dinner party" is a story of two women whose efforts have improved the life of thousands of impoverished people in two far-flung corners of the world.

Audette Exel and Sharon Beesley, two corporate lawyers turned charity bosses, were the principal organisers of last weekend's glitzy celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Mount Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay.

Business partners and best friends, the two women founded the ISIS Foundation six years ago, a charitable trust which funds six health and education projects in Nepal and a further two in Uganda. At the same time they founded their business, *ISIS Limited*, and the money it makes funds the charity.

So the pair have opted out of using their exceptional skills in international business purely for personal gain and instead the dollars they earn are helping some of the world's needy.

Since 1998 *ISIS Limited*, a corporate financing and consulting business, has paid out over \$1.2 million to the *ISIS Foundation* to fund its overseas projects, an amount bolstered by another \$1 million donated by supporters worldwide.

More than 650 guests paid around \$350 per head to attend a remarkable event held at the massive NATO hangar at Bermuda Airport last Saturday night and hosted jointly by the *ISIS Foundation* and the Hillary Himalayan Foundation.

Spectacular mountain displays and a performance by Australian band Yothu Yindi, who played free of charge, made the most of the ample space available at an event attended by Peter Hillary, Sir Edmund's son.

The money raised will be going to places in which such banquets would be the stuff of dreams.

ISIS projects have included the installation of pit latrines and smokeless stoves in Nepal and the running of a neo-natal special care baby unit in Uganda.

"*The ISIS Foundation* has grown quickly and we realise we have taken on an enormous responsibility," Ms Exel said. "For example, in one area of northwest Nepal, we are the only health care provider for 36,000 people.

"It's got to the point where there simply aren't enough hours in the day. So if the work of the *ISIS Foundation* is going to continue to expand we need some extra help."

The Everest anniversary event, *White Ice and Fire*, was the charity's first-ever fund-raising exercise. And from now on, with five years of audited accounts and successful projects up and running, they will be applying for further funding for their work from charitable foundations in the US.

Ms Exel and Ms Beesley became friends when they were both corporate lawyers in Hong Kong.

They went off on a two-year bicycle trip together, during which time they stopped off to work in a Romanian orphanage. They also went trekking in Nepal.

There they met a group of artists who were helping poor children and promptly sponsored two little girls.

"One is about to go to middle school and the other wants to be a teacher," Ms Exel said. "They were the first two children we helped. Nepal is a country that's desperately in need. And that's why we centred some of the *ISIS* projects there." Uganda was chosen as the other beneficiary of *ISIS* help because of Ms Exel's contact with the African country's first lady, Janet Museveni.

"Janet Museveni is a remarkable African leader," Ms Exel said. "We wanted to help somewhere in Africa and we thought we could get a lot done in a country where we knew the first lady."

The foundation works with local agencies in Nepal and Uganda to get things done and pays the wages of more than 30 people, including general manager Leonie Exel, special projects manager Uganda Debbie Lester and Nepal country manager Dr. Kimber Haddix McKay.

A civil war in Nepal has added to the difficulty of working in the remote Humla area. Isis has to work with the Maoist forces who control the northwestern region, rather than the Nepalese government.

Both Ms Exel and Ms Beesley make field trips.

"Going on a site visit is a very emotional experience for us," Ms Exel said. "We would sit there and plan these things, literally by drawing mud maps and it's amazing to go there and see that these ideas have become reality.

"To see that *ISIS* has done something so meaningful – you can't express the feeling. We do a lot of crying after a site visit.

"But it's the people on the ground who are doing the work. They know what they're doing. The site visits are more for us to have a look than to serve any management purpose."

On their visits, they take various medical supplies, toys and clothes donated by Bermuda residents. That means that their Crow Lane premises are occasionally clogged up with boxes packed with goodies. One of their favourite pictures is of a young Aids sufferer clutching a knitted and brightly-coloured Bermuda bear.

"There's a lot of goodwill in Bermuda and we've had tremendous support from the island. There is a philanthropic heart in Bermuda and people have trusted us with their money. Many people know us from business and they have faith that we will spend it well."

"We've also seen doctors from Bermuda who have gone out to work on our projects, including a radiologist and a paediatrician."

The pair said they felt exhausted and relieved at the success of the Everest weekend after three months of planning.

They gave Starla Williams credit for having the vision to choose the NATO hangar as a venue.

But they have no plans for more major fund-raising events.