

CAMPAIGN CRUSADER

AUDETTE EXEL ISIS FOUNDATION

Audette Exel was raised with a deep respect for other cultures and the belief that “imbalance in the world is wrong”. She learned this in part from her father who was a war correspondent in Vietnam.

Born in New Zealand and educated in Australia, she studied law and went on to become an international banker. She is the youngest woman to have run a publicly-traded bank, Bermuda Commercial Bank.

Audette experienced an epiphany whilst taking time out from her career with a three-year bicycle ride around Eastern Europe and Asia. She realised

that there was a dire need to unite power and capital with development work in order to “change to world”.

The ISIS Foundation grew out of this realisation, and was driven on by Audette’s business acumen and her unwavering commitment to social justice.

Established in 1997, The ISIS Foundation is an international development organisation dedicated to promoting the wellbeing of children and families in Nepal and Uganda.

“Because of the civil war in Nepal, predators were approaching families offering to take their children to safety...”

Originally, The ISIS Foundation began providing support to villages in the remote Humla region of Nepal in the form of smokeless stoves, latrines, clean water and solar or micro hydro-power.

Then Audette received a life-changing email from a 21-year-old British volunteer. The volunteer claimed to have discovered 22 Nepalese children living in a squalid basement in Kathmandu, on their way to being trafficked to India. The volunteer had heard that the ISIS Foundation had worked in that region and asked for help.

What the ISIS Foundation did next is testament to the depth of thought and passion with which Audette, 47, and her team approaches all of their development work. The organisation became “specialists” in the rescue and repatriation of trafficked children in Nepal.

“Because of the civil war in Nepal, predators were approaching families offering to take their children to safety,” Audette says, adding that ISIS discovered 300 children had been trafficked from the Humla region.



Christine and Audette at Kiwoko Hospital, Luwero, Uganda

ISIS spent months working with political and social welfare organisations attempting to regain custody of the children from the traffickers. Three Nepalese people walked around the mountains full-time for three months carrying photos of the children in an effort to locate their families. Meanwhile, homes and boarding schools were established to house the children, while ISIS also worked hard to help them hold on to Humla culture. “Repatriating these children raised complex ethical questions,” Audette says. “Their homes were at the centre of the Maoist uprising. We couldn’t bring them back.

“There was also no schooling up there. The standard of living was dramatically lower than in Kathmandu in terms of mortality and health care.”

It’s a two-pronged track, Audette says of the work in Nepal. “We educate the kids, keep them safe and secure, while keeping them connected to their families. We also raise the standard of living so they can be educated and safe in their own homes and villages.”

ISIS’ work in the Humla villages continues. To date, the organisation has enhanced the primary health care, education, income and employment and food security of 11 villages at a total cost of \$750,000. The task requires teams to work in villages that are inaccessible by road, often requiring equipment to be walked in.

ISIS has also established and manages a remote neonatal care unit (NICU) at the Kiwoko Hospital in Luwero, Uganda. The organisation provides: medical equipment; supplies; expert volunteers from nine hospitals in Seattle; and community based health care programs for mothers and babies, people living with HIV and people with diabetes.

With around 5% of the population living with HIV in Uganda, Audette describes the work there as akin to “going to war every day”.

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AUDETTE, ON WORKING IN REMOTE REGIONS:

“What I really love about international development work is the huge bang for your buck,” Audette says.

It is this thinking and its focus on remote regions that distinguishes the ISIS Foundation from other international development organisations.

“A lot of NGOs work in cities because they can deliver outcomes. The reason I wanted to work in remote areas was because remote people are forgotten,” she says.

“You could move 30 miles down the road and start all over again, but I very much believe you have to just start somewhere.”

THE ISIS FOUNDATION’S UNIQUE FUNDING STRUCTURE

The ISIS Foundation is supported by ISIS Businesses, which include a Bermuda law firm, a fund administration business and a corporate finance and private placement business. ISIS Businesses has provided over \$3.6 million to the foundation, providing support to more than 11,000 people per year for the past 12 years.

Audette’s day-to-day work involves the running of ISIS Businesses, the “funding engine” of the foundation. But one of her primary goals is to encourage other businesses to follow her lead.

“The underpinning philosophy of the ISIS Group is the belief that to truly affect social change, the world of business must hold hands with the world of development in a truly embedded way,” she says.

