

Working to make a difference - by Lilla Zuill
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Audette Exel and Sharon Beesley are anything but cookie cutter models of women succeeding in the highly- competitive world of banking and high finance.

That does not mean that they have not been successful: they have been. Ms. Exel is the former managing director of the Bermuda Commercial Bank while Ms Beesley was formerly head of banking of the then law firm Mello, Hollis, Jones & Martin.

Fast forward, and you will see that the two women now run their own corporate finance business – ISIS Limited- which was established in Bermuda 1997 and now has a staff of seven.

A typical day, as with many *execs*, easily runs to 12 hours and both women profess a love of their high-stress jobs in the corporate world. But, the difference lies in what happens to their bottom line: the company's profits finance a growing network of charitable operations in Nepal and Uganda.

The two business partners - who also happen to be best friends – said branching out on their own has not alleviated the stress factor in their jobs, but the two cite the benefits of being able to simultaneously run ISIS Limited, and the ISIS Charitable Foundation, as well worth it.

Ms. Exel said: “We occasionally miss the options, the bonuses and we are still under enormous stress, and working 12-hour days. But, now there is also a sense of enormous fun and freedom, as we really feel we are making a difference in the lives of children who actually need it.”

If that alone does not justify the effort, the two also point out that running their own business give them indirect perks: case in point is the option to work in a “kid and pet-friendly office”.

Indeed, sitting in their colourful offices next to the Crow Lane Bakery at the entrance to the East Broadway thoroughfare the pair are joined by Ms. Exel's dog, Noah. And off the corner is the “children's office,” where Ms. Beesley's ten-year-old son, Jean Jacques, can work on homework after school.

The two, who met while working as lawyers in Hong Kong, have been running the dual-purpose venture for four years now, and both seem proud – and also a little surprised – at what they have been able to accomplish.

One of the reasons for setting up the corporate finance business, and simultaneously, the charitable foundation was because of a belief that contribution – and not just writing a cheque – should be part of one’s working life.

The pair had also seen, first hand, that there was a need, as they had taken a two-year round the world trip on bicycles together. And although they said they did “not quite” make it all the way around the world, both worked in Romanian orphanage and felt the need to contribute.

Both cited the Foundation as a tantamount way of “expanding Jean-Jacques’ horizon”. Ms. Beesley pointed out that although her son is being raised in Bermuda, which is one of the worlds’ wealthiest countries, he is not living in a vacuum, but is aware of what might face children in the developing world.

Indeed, Ms. Beesley said her son has been to the ISIS Uganda project and is very aware of what the Foundation is working to accomplish.

Speaking of the link between the ISIS Limited and the ISIS Foundation; Ms. Exel said: “We are an exempted company business which has a contract to manage and cover the administration and general costs of the Foundation.”

Ms. Beesley said that the costs of operating the Foundation are a bottom line expense of the business, adding that ISIS Limited has contributed just short of \$1 million since early 1998.

ISIS also seeks projects costs from third parties but the duo said they do not fundraise in Bermuda because they do not want to confuse the ISIS business scope.

Despite this, Ms. Beesley said the Foundation does at times get unsolicited funds and both say Bermuda has been “enormously supportive”, of the initiative.

Ms. Exel said ISIS – the Egyptian Goddess of Motherhood depicted with one foot on land, one foot in the sea – is the perfect symbol of the multiple convergences in their lives; the convergence between the ISIS corporate and charitable worlds, and the convergence between the financial sector and insurance sector – where ISIS Limited’s core business lies.

The ISIS Foundation continues to grow and Ms. Exel’s sister, Leonie Exel, came on board earlier this year, initially to give the charity administrative and structural focus.

Leonie Exel, who has an extensive background working with Non Governmental Agencies in Australia, is spearheading an extensive programme in Nepal and Uganda.

From June 2001 to June 2002, the Foundation has a heavy agenda of both educational and medical programmes in the two countries.

In Nepal this includes everything from the building of hostel to house schoolchildren, immunisations and installing more efficient wood burning stoves and toilets in 100 homes.

In Uganda, ISIS has teamed up with a local hospital to assist mothers and babies.

In both Nepal and Uganda, ISIS said it has focused on outreach programmes that benefit women and children, as research in primary health care shows aid should start with mothers and babies.

The Foundation also said its focus was on the fact that women are often one of the “most disadvantaged groups in these societies” and because there is such a need from women and children.

Leonie Exel pointed out that even basics, like clean razor blades, can make a real difference in mortality rates, with “unnecessary” deaths resulting from unsanitary conditions and lack of access to basic supplies.

The Foundation also strives to involve the communities that it serves in an effort to avoid becoming “a white elephant”. Citing an example, Audette Exel spoke of establishing a school in Nepal in a joint effort with the community, which donated land and labour.

Ultimately, the team said they hope ISIS is a paradigm of how business-generated revenue can work for charitable gain.

Calling it a dream come true, Ms. Exel and Ms. Beesley said, at the very least, they never have to wonder what they will do next.

“We will run ISIS for the rest of our lives,” Ms. Exel said.