

Former student radical still trying to save the world

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Audette Exel of the Isis Foundation (Photo by Akil Simmons)

Premature babies in developing countries often die before taking their first breath due to a lack of money and necessary resources.

The Isis Foundation, a charity that helps people in remote, impoverished parts of Nepal and Uganda, wants to change all that. They have pioneered technology that can save the lives of premature babies with very little money.

Audette Exel helped found the Isis Foundation in Bermuda in 1998 shortly after she arrived here to run Bermuda Commercial Bank. She now lives in Sydney, Australia, from where she continues her work with the charity.

The charity's latest cause is helping people in the Luwero District of Uganda. It works with pre-term babies in the neonatal intensive care unit at Kiwoko Hospital, in collaboration with the University of Washington and Seattle Children's Hospital.

Life-saving neonatal intensive care units were developed made entirely in Uganda with materials from Uganda as part of the project. As a result, it costs around \$5 every time they are used compared with \$500 in the United States.

"We are putting a lot of energy and effort into that and we think it is cutting-edge," said Ms Exel. "It is a very inexpensive way to save a lot of babies' lives. It is something we don't think anyone else is doing in any other developing settings, so we are very proud of that."

One of the pillars of the Isis Foundation is knowledge-sharing. The Foundation hopes to share information from the project with other organisations in hopes of increasing the number of people they touch without expanding into other countries or changing their scope. They currently assist about 20,000 people in that way and hope to raise the number to 100,000.

Susan Biggs, executive officer of the Isis Foundation, said: “We want to really focus on doing well on what we currently do. We are trying to package up information and put together tool kits that will be available to other organisations.”

Ms Exel used her knowledge in banking and law to set up the Isis Group. The corporate advisory group is now based in Australia, and operates to produce funds to run the Isis Foundation’s charitable projects.

In Bermuda, the Kathmandu Kids Club charity raises money for the Isis Foundation’s work with children in Nepal. The Isis Foundation spends about \$1 million on services in Uganda and Nepal each year.

“I wanted to work in countries where there were the lowest quality of living indicators in the world,” said Ms Exel. “I was looking at countries with high infant and maternal mortality rates. People in these countries often had poor access to clean water and very low literacy rates. I also wanted to work in countries that were landlocked because it is invariably worse in a landlocked country. There is no access to ports and it is harder to move goods into and out of the country quickly. There was an initial scan which gave a frightening number of countries that fit this criteria.”

One of the reasons she chose Nepal was that she had trekked through the country with Sharon Beesley, her Isis co-founder.

“I had been to the country and saw how magical it was, but also how poor it was,” she said. “With Uganda, when I was running the Bermuda Commercial Bank I would get invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. In the early 1990s I was in a coffee shop there when I met the first lady of Uganda, Janet Museveni. After chatting with her we became friends. I promised her that some day I was going to find a way to help her country. She said that if I helped her country she would do everything she could to open every door for me. Our friendship continued and we wrote to each other often.”

Ms Exel said her eyes were opened early on to the injustices of the world; her father, David Exel, worked as a foreign correspondent covering the Vietnam War. For a time the family lived in Singapore, and that really changed her outlook on life.

“It was a fantastic way to grow up, because living in Singapore made me understand what it meant to be a minority,” she said. “It was such a multicultural environment, but as the little Anglo kid in Singapore, I really was in the minority. That gave me real respect for different cultures. I can remember going back to New Zealand and being shocked that the dominant culture looked like me. The Singapore experience gave me a passion for the wider world that has been with me to this day. It led me to Bermuda.”

In the past she has been referred to as a “student radical”, a label that makes her proud. She said that anyone who is a student who does not consider themselves a radical must not have their eyes open.

“We live in a world of profound injustice and it has always been so in my lifetime,” she said. “Through my student days I was very actively involved in the Anti-Apartheid movement and the peace movement. I worked with the feminist movement. I saw that because I was born in a privilege and in a country at peace, that it was incumbent on me to do all I could to bring about some small amount of change. Social justice and activism has been at my core my whole life.”

Launching the Isis Foundation in Bermuda was what made it so successful. She doubted whether it would have got off the ground so easily in a larger country.

“Bermuda stood by this crazy idea,” she said. “The first trust was a Bermuda trust. The reason we could do it here was because people knew me and trusted me because I had been running the bank. I think Bermudians and people resident here are fundamentally generous. There was a real sense of wanting to help us, on the business side and on the Foundation side, to make sure it grew to what it is today. It has been quite a journey.”

Useful websites: www.isisgroup.org, www.kathmandukidsclub.org