



AUDETTE EXEL IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE WHERE IT REALLY MATTERS. SHE HAS BEEN WORKING TOWARDS HER BIG DREAM ALL HER LIFE.



What a wonderful world it would be if everyone went about business as Audette Exel does. She's a pioneer for making business for purpose (rather than profit) really work. "I think there's a much wider role for all of us in business to play. My big dream is that as a society we divide and use all our skills to make the world a better place," Audette says.

Audette is the Founder and CEO of the ISIS Group, which consists of ISIS (Asia Pacific) – a private placement and corporate advisory business. And unlike most businesses, the profits from ISIS (Asia Pacific) don't go into the pockets of shareholders, but instead fund the work of the ISIS Foundation, the not-for-profit arm of the Group. The two work together in beautiful synergy – the poster child for what many could achieve.

It may be surprising to discover that Audette built her career at the opposite end of the spectrum – making the rich richer. In her role as director of one of Bermuda's three banks, she became one of the youngest women in the world to head a publicly traded bank at age 32. Before her directorship,

# FROM POORER TO RICHER

AUDETTE EXEL TAKES A CORPORATE APPROACH TO A SOCIAL MISSION, MAKING INROADS IN CLEAN WATER, NEWBORN CARE AND TRAFFICKING IN NEPAL AND UGANDA. BY REBECCA BODMAN.

## THE VISIONARY

*Audette Exel*

**POSITION** Co-Founder and Chair of The ISIS Foundation. CEO of ISIS (Asia Pacific).

**COMPANY** The ISIS Foundation

**WEBSITE** [isisgroup.org](http://isisgroup.org)

Audette practised as a lawyer specialising in international finance working for top law firms in Sydney, Hong Kong and the UK.

## PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION

Unlike some, Audette didn't fall into the not-for-profit space after finding she had so much money she didn't know what to do with it; no – it was her plan all along. "Going into business for me was a very deliberate way of →



## MY BIG DREAM

trying to learn about a set of skills that would help me do something for those in need. ISIS represents the reconciliation of two parts of my life; business and development work.”

Now 50, Audette grew up in New Zealand and was a student activist in the early 80s. A force to be reckoned with at pro-feminist and anti-apartheid demonstrations. When her family relocated to Melbourne, Audette attended Melbourne University to finish her law degree. It was there that she realised not everyone wants to change the world; her new peers were more concerned with making money, and lots of it. Audette saw how these two very different mindsets could work together.

The ISIS Group, named after the Egyptian goddess of motherhood, was born in 1998. The Foundation arm now works in some of the poorest villages in Nepal and Uganda, helping over 20,000 people in poverty each year.

### TACKLING CHALLENGES

Over the past 14 years, the ISIS Foundation has come to focus on three areas of development work. In Nepal they focus on the delivery of services such as solar power, micro-hydro power and clean drinking water. The region the Foundation works in in Nepal is one of the most remote in the world, making service delivery paramount. “We work in an area called Humla; it’s 25 days walk from the nearest road. I had a particular interest in working remotely and when I asked people about where the really remote areas of Nepal were they all mentioned this place. It’s an area which was so remote and so hard to get to that nobody worked there; you needed a special permit zone because it’s on the Tibetan border. I met an extraordinary American anthropologist who lived up there to write her PhD. She took me up there and she’s been working with ISIS since that day.”

In Nepal, ISIS also works on rescuing trafficked girls. “We are well known in Nepal for the rescue, residential care and then reunification with family of children that were trafficked as a result of the civil war. These kids have been inadvertently trafficked; their parents paid to get them out of the way of the civil war and they’ve ended up in the hands of real predators.”

The ISIS Foundation currently have full custody of 136 children, their youngest is 12 and was three when she was rescued. “It’s an amazing story how we found the kids. We were contacted by a British volunteer who’d been working on the outskirts of Kathmandu. She came across some children in absolutely appalling conditions and the only thing she could find out about them was

that they were from Humla. She Googled Humla and found us and asked for help.”

The Foundation’s third area of work is in Uganda where they focus on newborn care, maternal healthcare and working with adults and children living with HIV AIDS in remote areas. “We work in the Luwero district which was badly affected by the civil war. It was where the armies of the north and south met, so many people died in the area. The community largely regenerated around an incredible hospital called Kiwoko Hospital who we now have a really deep partnership with.”



NEWBORN CARE AND RESCUING CHILDREN FROM HUMAN TRAFFICKING ARE JUST TWO OF AUDETTE'S MISSIONS.

### COMPLEX LAYERS

Working in two different countries, each with their own complex problems, brings challenges, and lots of them. “In any work like this it’s hard; we’re dealing with very complex cultural, religious and ethical overlays in countries with limited rule of law and no infrastructure and in the case of Uganda, we’re working with terrible diseases.”

While their work on the ground is incredible, it’s how the Foundation is funded that’s truly remarkable. And despite what you may have thought, the business arm of the Group doesn’t use the work of the Foundation to attract clients. Each segment is kept quite separate.

“I decided right at the start that it would muddy the waters for the business and it might make the business clients feel a little uncomfortable; so many people we work with don’t know what the bigger picture of ISIS is. It’s not until you come into our office and hear people talking about incubators, or child trafficking that you’d realise we’re different to other financial firms. The business

is set in an industry that’s very competitive and even though business clients may think it’s a nice thing that we’re set up as a business for purpose it may confuse the conversation.”

And their strategy works. “We closed a big transaction last year that allowed us to fund the Foundation for 18 months. To do that in the GFC and as one of the smaller guys was a fantastic feeling. I felt a real endorsement that you can run a business for a purpose,” Audette says.

One moment that Audette often comes back to for inspiration and validation came out of ISIS’s work in Uganda.

“One moment that is really special for me was when the first triplets were born and survived in Uganda.

“They are called Martin, Mildred and Marvin and are now eight years old. It was a great day for ISIS because in remote settings, multiple births often don’t survive; usually the mum will be lost too. So the day they were saved, we really knew we were giving a level of care quite exceptional by the standards of the country.” ❖